

Reintroducing Hope

by MarvelSpiderMan

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Summary: Peter's Aunt May has a heart attack and is then declared an unfit solo guardian, leaving Peter sad, alone, and guilty, living homeless on the streets of New York, running out of resources to continue as Spiderman. That is, until his seemingly innocuous friend Sam Wilson turns out to be a lot more than Peter anticipated. ADOPTED FROM VITALICIOUSCREATIONS.

1. Chapter 1

Hey guys! I got permission by Vitaliciouscreations to adopt their story, "Reintroducing Hope." I am super excited to continue this story, and I will still be doing TDITLoPP at the same time.

Peter needed to stop making friends. When was he going to learn that in the end, people only ended up hurt when they were around him, or worse. He hadn't even gotten too close to this guy, but now he was probably in the hospital or something, all because of Peter's stupid curse. You'd think he would have learned by now.

Some old lady out walking her purse dog glared fiercely at him, wrinkling her nose at Peter's ratty, unclean clothes and dirty tennis shoes. He was tempted to glare right back at her, but instead he just turned his head down to watch his shoes as he shuffled past her and her expensive-looking dog. Getting in a glaring competition with an old woman would do him no good, and might even get the cops called on him again for loitering or whatever it was been. For how many homeless there were in New York City, it was surprising how high the stigma against them was. He almost felt disgusted with his old self for how grossly ignorant he'd been before.

He was only a little whiles away from his favorite bench, one that had been placed intentionally on a path that was now abandoned for all except highly-motivated joggers and maybe the occasional panicked criminal because of the small but steep hill it was placed on. Due to the abandonment of the path the foliage was also much wilder around there, which made it impossible to see the bench from the ground,

which was even better. The bench was also almost at the top of the hill, but not quite, so it was still slanted a bit, not nice for sitting, as you'd slide down it gradually, but if Peter braced his feet in just the right positions, he could sleep there for maybe an entire night with no interruptions, provided that no crime happened at all, ever, that night.

Peter snorted to himself as he started stumbling up the steep slope to his bench. The thought was downright laughable, even considering how crime rates had noticeably dropped ever since he'd gotten out of the street, something around three years ago, give or take. Three years, that was actually ridiculous to him for some reason. Three whole years, and he'd gone from a fully functional family with his loving Aunt and Uncle, to being a sad homeless kid on the streets desperately waiting for his eighteenth birthday, when he'd be able to stop running from Child Protective Services, inherit the little bit of money his parents had left him, see his aunt again, clean up, get a job, and become a little more functional again. Maybe get some therapy or something, though he'd never be able to tell them about the Spider-Man thing, so it'd probably be useless for almost everything, except maybe getting him to be able to talk to people again.

He reached his bench, and sat down heavily, involuntarily sighing as he did so. He brought his knees up to his chest and slung his arms around them, hugging them to himself. He felt really bad right now, and he knew he wouldn't be able to do anything about it, but sleeping a little before inevitably waking up because of his spider-sense and going out on patrol would be better than just sitting there and thinking about how bad he felt.

Peter switched his body into a sleeping position, staring up at the still-light sky. The street lamps in the park weren't even on yet, so it had to be before six-thirty, but not that much before cause the sun looking like it was fairly close to setting. Crime really started around seven to nine, so if Peter was lucky he might be able to get in a few hours. That would be pretty cool. He'd been overworking himself, well, since he'd started this stupid Spider-Man thing, and now with his extra-fast metabolism and the fact that food was pretty hard to come by when you were homeless, getting any sleep would be good for him. Plus it'd probably give his body a little more time to work on his broken healing factor, which worked a lot better with a high influx of energy. But since he wasn't getting much food these days, every injury he came by was spending longer and longer to heal. It wouldn't be long before he had to start stealing from hotdog stands, and Peter really didn't want to do that.

His eyes had drifted gradually shut while he was busy thinking about his situation, and now he was almost all the way to sleep. New York was a constant clamor of noises loud and soft, annoying and soothing, but after so much practice it was effortless to force them to fade into the background as Peter settled down for another uncomfortable nap in a long, uninterrupted list of many, from the tops of skyscrapers to the inside of cranes, to countless ones on this very bench. Peter never thought he'd get used to being homeless this easily, but given enough time he supposed you could get used to anything. Like being Spider-Man without webbing, since the materials to make the formula were bought with money he no longer had, or not having anybody's company anymore.

God, he was messed up. He'd tell himself to get his life together, but right now it was the closest to 'together' that it was going to be for a while. He heaved a slow breath, feeling the final layers of sleep slowly settling down on him. It was almost strange how easy it was for him to fall asleep, but it was necessary, so not _too_ strange. His breaths slowed down even more, and he could hear his heartbeat inside of his chest doing the same. He was going to be asleep in a few seconds if nothing happened, but knowing his luck, of course it would... but no, he took a final breath and settled softly into a gentle nap. Ahh, blissful sleep.

As soon as a hand touched down on Peter's shoulder, he was sitting upright, steadyng his feet on the ground and ready to sprint away from whoever was waking him up. He'd had way too many encounters with cops that rich people had called on him and other various well-meaning "good samaritans" to not have this response practically trained into him.

It was a good samaritan, but not just any random good samaritan, a good samaritan Peter thought he might not ever see again. He blinked up in surprise at one of his only friends. Well, really, his only friend at this point. Sam Wilson, veteran, high-maintenance jogger (which was how Peter had met him), and, as already stated, textbook good samaritan.

He held up his hands a little, a small smile playing across his face as he looked at Peter. "Didn't mean to startle you, kid. Just though you might wanna wake up for this." He shook a white plastic bag he was holding in his right hand lightly. "I brought you some food if you want it."

Peter hesitated for a second, doubt in the back of his mind flickering for just an instant. There'd been a few times when people had offered him drugged food and then tried to do awful things to him, just because he was now a homeless kid and people didn't really care about them. But he quickly pushed the doubt away. Sam Wilson was his friend, he'd brought him food many times before, and he would probably do it again. Peter reached out a hand, drawing his feet back up to his chest, and Sam grinned and pulled out a McDonald's bag. "Figured you could use the calories."

As he held the bag out to Peter, the younger boy noticed something weird about his right arm. He was using it too stiffly, like it had been injured recently, though not too badly or otherwise Peter would be able to see a wrapping of some sort underneath his sleeve. While Peter took the bag of delicious-smelling food, Sam sat down next to him and dug into his own McDonald's meal. Peter looked him up and down for any other injuries, eyes narrowing a bit.

His legs seemed to be fine, though he was wearing suspiciously new shoes. The right side of his torso might have been a little damaged, but the arm was what Peter was most worried about. At least until he got to Sam's head, and saw a long cut across his forehead, with a few butterfly stitches pasted on either side, keeping it together so it could heal properly. Sam stopped chewing, and Peter knew it would be polite to look away, eat the food his amazing friend had procured for him, but he couldn't. Sam was hurt, just like Peter had thought. Was it because of Peter's curse? Probably. What had happened? Car accident? Mugging? What if Sam had been-

"Kid?" Sam asked softly, and Peter snapped to attention, looking at him, but unable to avoid his eyes snapping back to the cut every few seconds. Sam reached up curiously and probed the area, wincing and hissing a bit in pain when his fingers found what Peter had been looking at. "Oh, yeah, that. I forgot that was there, almost. Kinda got used to it. Don't worry about me, I've had way worse."

Peter hesitated, but reached for his food again, shifting his body so he was angled towards Sam as he pulled out the double bacon cheeseburger Sam had gotten him. Peter didn't even like bacon that much, but considering how many calories it gave him, he'd take it any day. He'd quickly learned that the bigger the meal, the better, because you didn't know when your next was going to be, and when your nightly activities were as energy-consuming as his were, you needed every bit you could get.

He tilted his head at Sam a little bit as he set the wrapped cheeseburger in his lap and reached for his bag, staring to tear it into a placemat at the seams. He and Sam would pile their fries together and pour some ketchup on the white paper. The first time Sam had done the setup he'd claimed that it was better because they could salt their fries more accurately like that, and they stayed warmer like that, all piled together. While both were true, Peter had started to suspect Sam did it mostly so he could sneak Peter extra fries without Peter rejecting the charity because of his pride.

"You wanna know what happened," Sam said, gesturing to his forehead when Peter kept glancing at it. Peter waited a moment before giving a decisive nod, spilling his fries out onto the makeshift placemat places between them on the slanted bench. It would end up sliding more towards Peter because of gravity, and Peter was sure that his companion had somehow planned this. Ehh, he wasn't complaining.

"Pick up the drinks by your feet, will you?" Sam said, motioning down to drinks Peter hadn't even noticed between Sam's mysterious injuries and the blessed food he suddenly had access to. Peter reached down and grabbed the drinks, hearing Sam spilling his own fries out next to Peter's, and then rummaging in his bag, probably for ketchup or something. The bacon cheeseburger got a little squished when Peter reached down, but he really didn't mind. It was wrapped in McDonald's weird yellow paper, so no mess, and it felt pretty nice and warm against his stomach, even through his hoodie, shirt, and his Spider-Man suit, which he still wore beneath his clothes, but now, all the time.

"Yours is the Coke, mine's the Sprite," Sam said, reaching for the lighter drink with a ketchup packet in his other hand. Peter handed his drink to him, wrinkling his nose a little bit, and Sam barked a laugh. "Are you making that expression because I ordered Sprite? Sprite is a perfectly good beverage, kiddo, just because you hate it..." Peter made an exaggerated disgusted face at Sam, and the dude grinned at him and snorted a little before tearing the ketchup packet open and squirting it into a small pile near the fries. Peter grabbed the few ketchup packets he'd piled neatly to the side when he'd split open his bag and started helping the pile grow, using one of the packets on his burger and the other three on the pile, and Sam did the same.

After taking a bite into the burger that basically tasted like heaven

in his mouth, after two days without any food and only water-fountain drinking water, he looked at Sam, who was enjoying his own meal. After a while of staring at him, Sam made a shrugging gesture and asked, "What?" Peter paused for a moment, wondering if he should push, before pointing at the forehead cut. He really wanted to know what had happened. Maybe it wasn't so bad? Who was he kidding, butterfly stitches meant that he'd been taken to an actual hospital, and considering how tough Sam was, it was probably really bad. God, this was all his fault.

"Believe me, kiddo," Sam drawled, bringing him back to reality. "The story is so crazy, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Peter raised an eyebrow, but Sam just laughed. "Yeah, crazy even for a New Yorker, kid. It's a long story, too, and I kinda don't feel like talking about it. That okay?"

Peter pursed his lips, but nodded. He could understand not wanting to talk about it. Hell, that was basically his motto by now. Or maybe just not talking at all, ever since Aunt May had had her heart attack. He'd talked to the Millers, his strict foster family, a little, but when they kept bugging him with everything and screaming at him when he was constantly late for curfew, telling him to speak up and talk more, and to get over it, your Aunt isn't even dead, he just wanted to scream. But when he did, them told him to shut up, and took his camera and phone away. He didn't want to talk anymore, not to anybody except Aunt May. Maybe Sam, sometimes, but it was better if the guy kept thinking he was mute, like he thought now. If he didn't know Peter's name, maybe the curse wouldn't touch him.

Fingers snapped in front of Peter's face, and Peter nearly grabbed Sam's wrist and twisted it around, but stopped himself before his hands could fly up more than a few inches. Sam was a friend. A really cool friend. And if he found out even a little about Peter it would be all over, and Peter would be alone again. And he couldn't be alone again. Sam had almost left him, if Peter did anything now he could lose his only friend, not only his friend but somebody who occasionally provided food for Peter, and company every single time. Even if it was all one-sided conversations, if Sam left...

But they always leave. They always leave. His parents, then Uncle Ben, then he'd met Gwen, and then caused her father to die, and then she died, and then Aunt May had her heart attack and couldn't take care of him any more, and Harry and MJ had been lost when the Millers took him in, and then the Millers themselves had been lost when Peter eventually just stayed away, because the strict rules restricting his nighttime activities and even stricter punishments became too hard to bear, and he'd been all alone. Sam would leave too, eventually, and Peter wouldn't even blame him.

Peter bit into his already half-eaten cheeseburger with vigor, staring at the man across from him. He was so nice, the world almost didn't deserve him. He was the only one willing to hang out with a selectively mute homeless kid who he didn't even know the name of, and he bought Peter food and let him jog with him a few times, though Peter found jogging underwhelming to fighting crime and/or web slinging. He talked to Peter, hung out with him after recovering from rigorous early morning jogs. He made stupid jokes and paid attention enough to answer Peter's silent questions, and when he left, Peter

was going to be crushed, just like he had been with the rest of them. But eventually, he would leave. Because they always left. And it was always Peter's fault.

Peter's burger suddenly felt a little less good on his tastebuds, but he forced himself to chew and swallow. He grabbed the yellow paper he'd discarded to the side and carefully wrapped the remaining half of the burger up, for later. It wasn't good to eat so much all at once after not having eaten for so long anyway.

"What, you don't like bacon cheeseburgers anymore?" Sam asked from the other side of the tilted bench, raising an eyebrow at Peter. He couldn't do much but shrug in response. Bacon cheeseburgers weren't his favorite food, and since Sam brought him so many, the taste was quickly becoming almost strangely gross. But if Peter had eaten half a hot dog a business man had thrown at him once, he sure as hell would eat food Sam had actually bought for him.

Peter's stomach made a little grumbly sound, like it wasn't exactly happy that Peter had stopped eating either. Peter reached for the large drink of Coke Sam had gotten him and took a long gulp, swallowing and then offering Sam a tentative smile. He didn't know how to convey his next question without words, but he would find a way. He was pretty creative.

Peter set his drink down, and then motioned to Sam's head injury again. The man sighed, but before he could say anything, Peter tapped his wrist and gave Sam an expectant look. That caused the man pause, confusion etching its way onto his face, so it was obvious he hadn't gotten it. Peter looked around, and his eyes landed on Sam's watch, so he pointed at that, and then Sam's head wound, and then back to the watch.

"Uhm, time, and my injury? How much time will it take for me to heal?" Peter made a face, and Sam tried again. "How much time did the injury take? How much time did it take for me to get the injury?"

Peter gave him a dry look, and then held up nine fingers. Sam paused for a moment. "Nine? Nine what? Nine time? Nine days?" Peter nodded quickly before he could say anything else "Nine days...Oh! It's been nine days since I've last seen you, right? I normally come around pretty frequently. Are you wondering if my injury has anything to do with why I haven't seen you in nine days?" Peter nodded again, smiling a bit. Sam grinned. "Hey, if I ever get to play charades again, I'm going to be pretty good at it because of you." His smile dropped. "Oh god, sorry."

Peter shrugged, showing he wasn't offended, and motioned for Sam to go on talking. "Right, nine days. It does, a little, I guess. It wasn't that bad, the injury is actually just because of something a little crazier that happened to me a while ago, and I was caught up with some things. I'm sorry I didn't come see you sooner, you probably missed jogging with me in the mornings, right?" Sam snorted at Peter's expression at that. "Yeah, you like running, not jogging. You know, you're pretty fast for a small guy." Peter shrugged in response, not sure of what else to do, and Sam polished off the rest of his burger.

Peter stared a bit as Sam reached for a fry. Yeah, he could probably

eat. And he couldn't save the fries for later, because they tasted disgusting when they were cold. And he should try to get at least some of those fries in him before he went on patrol. They'd probably help with his awareness, at least, since his reflexes would be more open if he wasn't as hungry as nights before.

Peter and Sam started devouring the fries, which were steadily getting cooler, along with the night air. Peter guessed by the dimness of the sky it was probably around seven thirty, maybe eight if he was misjudging how light it was. The sun was probably still sitting on the horizon, but he couldn't see it past all the skyscrapers and shit.

Sam's phone rang, startling Peter so much he dropped the fry he was holding. Thankfully, he caught it just as quickly with his fast reflexes, and popped it in his mouth while Sam scrambled to hit the 'accept call' button on his phone. Peter frowned a little as the older man held his phone up to his ear, because that wasn't Sam's old phone. That was a new phone, with a touchscreen and a dark blue cover, while Sam's old phone had been a dinky Blackberry with so many scratches it looked like it had gotten into a fight with a house cat and lost.

"Heya, Ca- Steve," Sam corrected himself, quickly glancing in Peter's direction. Peter narrowed his eyes, but quickly widened them appropriately again and put an innocent look on his face. Sam's business was Sam's business, not Peter's. Peter was just some weird homeless kid Sam had taken a liking to, for whatever reason. "I'm actually at the park right now, why?" Peter reached for another fry, trying to divert his attention from Sam's phone call, but seeing at there was nothing else going on...

"No, I'm just hanging out with a friend, actually." Peter couldn't ignore the surge of happiness that fluttered inside of him because Sam had called him his friend, but just like times before, he shoved it down. Sam didn't really mean that. He barely knew anything about Peter, not even his name. He didn't actually know his favorite food, Peter just hadn't corrected him when he'd assumed it was bacon cheeseburgers when Peter had perked up at the mention of food. He didn't know anything about Peter's past, he didn't even know what Peter's voice sounded like.

"I guess I could head over, give me half an hour, okay?" Sam responded to the guy-Steve-on the other end. "Yeah, yeah, okay, see you in a little while. Bye." Sam took the phone away from his ear and clicked the end call button, lifting his body up a bit off the bench so he could tuck it back in his pocket. "Sorry about that, 's a new friend. He wants me to meet..." Sam trailed off in the middle of his sentence, a smile worming onto his face as he waved his hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it. Let's eat these fries before they get gross."

Peter paused for a bit, sensing there was a lot more to it than Sam was telling him, but like he'd said before, Sam's business was Sam's business. After another few seconds, and Sam giving him a hesitant look, Peter shook off his suspicion and reached for another fry.

When Sam left, probably a little earlier than a half hour later, Peter waited about five minutes and then tucked the rest of his burger into his jacket pocket before crouching down and stripping off his jacket, hoodie, and then his shirt, placing them to the side while he pulled off his jeans as well. He fished into his jean pockets for his mask and gloves while toeing his ratty tennis shoes off. They were already a few sizes too big for him, so wearing his thin Spider-Man boots underneath actually helped them stay on, and with less transition time between Spiderman and Peter Parker. He quickly pulled the mask and gloves on, pausing a moment while looking regretfully at his wrists.

His web shooters had gotten damaged a while ago, and he hadn't had the money or resources to repair them like he had had before. Plus, the ingredients he needed to make his web fluid were way too expensive for the few quarters he got tossed his direction every week. And anyway, he needed that money for laundry since he only had one set of clothes now, and of course the occasional piece of black embroidery thread if he ran out that week. He was lucky there was already a web pattern on his suit, because without spare spandex, it was like half patchwork by now. Peter was getting better at dodging, but the lack of energy was taking it's toll, and he couldn't dodge every blow.

But hey, Spider-Man without webs was still Spider-Man, even if the wall-crawler didn't talk anymore. The costume had become iconic enough, and ever since, what, four months ago, when the mayor had announced a rescinding of the arrest warrant for Spider-Man, Spidey merch started selling like crazy, more than it already was, at least. Turns out a lot more people were fans of Spider-Man than Peter had thought. Too bad he didn't see a penny for any of that, but it's not like he would have anyway, being a minor and all that.

Peter made sure all of his clothes were successfully rolled into a tiny ball, and then he shoved them into a bush near the bench, rearranging the branches slightly so that nobody would notice the clothes ball if they were to walk by, which in itself was very unlikely, considering the undesirable location of the path. Then he stepped back, stretched his limbs out a little, and squeezed past the foliage, gaining speed running down the hill so that when he reached the bottom and jumped, his momentum carried him past the sidewalk and bike lane to the top of a car, which he did a handspring off of and flipped around so he landed on the next car roof, and carried his momentum by running across the other car roofs before jumping again and sticking to the second story of an apartment building.

Peter moved his body to the side so that he was clinging to a wall, not a window, and then started climbing the apartment building quickly. It was easier to see everything from higher up, not to mention leaping from roof to roof was easier than running from the side of a building to the side of a building. Now that he didn't have his webs, he was at a bit of a disadvantage in the mobile category, but he made due.

Peter reached the top of the apartment building in no time. He hadn't been nearly as good at climbing walls when he relied of his webs, but now he could do it really quickly almost effortlessly. He pulled his body up over the ledge of the apartment building and looked around, before bracing the back of his foot against the ledge and tensing his

leg muscles. The next roof was kinda far so he'd need a running start. He rolled his shoulders and hips before pushing off, sprinting at full speed across the roof of the apartment building.

When he reached the edge his leg muscles coiled before setting him off, and he spread his arms out a little for better balance and more wind resistance as he sailed towards the next building. The roof had been a little taller than he first anticipated, and halfway through the jump Peter knew he was going to have to stick, so he adjusted his position a little bit, extending his legs out in front of him and bending his elbows, readying for impact. When he hit the building, his momentum was great enough that he actually had to push away a little bit to keep his face from face-planting into the brickwork. It wasn't much effort, though, and once the impact had rolled through him he peeled a hand off and put it above him, ready to climb to the roof.

That was when a scream sounded below him, probably not too far from here. He strained his ears and could hear the sound of a muffled squeak, probably somebody shoving their hand over the screamer's mouth. Of course. Peter pushed off the building back to the apartment building, rebounding off the two until he reached the ground, rolling to get the force out without hurting himself, and then sprinting through the alleyways until he came across a scene of five big thugs surrounding two smaller women.

Immediately, he sprung into action, and due to his newfound silence he successfully knocked out one guy and was working on the next before the other three knew what hit 'em. One of the girls started blubbering in relief while the other stared wide-eyed at him. He ignored them, for the most part, since now the thugs' attention was on him.

It was almost laughably easy to dispatch of the other three guys, even without his webs, but Peter wasn't laughing by any means. He walked over to the girls and offered a hand down, and the one who wasn't crying accepted it after a moment. Peter hauled her to her feet and she stuttered out, "Th-thanks," before reaching out for her friend. Peter shrugged and nodded, hoping to look as friendly as possible. Sometimes the people he saved were scared of him, more so now that he couldn't reassure them. It's not like he wouldn't if he could talk to people anymore, but he just...couldn't.

The girl and her friends scrambled to their feet and left as Peter slunk back into the alley, making sure all the thugs were sufficiently knocked out, and trusting the girls to call the police with their location. When he went over to the fourth thug, the guy's hand shot up and tried to wrap itself around his throat, but Peter diverted the attack and pressed a pressure point under the guy's chin for seven seconds, and he was out like a light. Thank god Peter had learned that little trick before he'd lost his webs, because otherwise this would be a lot grosser than it had any right to be.

The fifth guy was out cold, just like Peter thought. He stood up and rubbed the back of his head a little, breathing slowly. "C-C'mo—" his voice cracked from disuse, and his shoulders settled down. He felt like crying, or punching something. He could talk, he knew he could, so why was it whenever somebody was around, it seemed like his vocal cords stopped working? Sure, he'd found that when he didn't

talk, things sometimes seemed nicer, but sometimes he genuinely wanted to talk, maybe just to Sam, but he couldn't.

Peter was really fucked up, wasn't he?

Sighing at the failed attempt at speech, Peter launched himself at a wall and pulled himself up, climbing up to the top of the building. While he did so, his mind wandered, despite his best efforts to stop it. Would he ever be able to talk to anybody ever again? If he could see Aunt May, which was out of the question until he turned eighteen, but figuratively, would he be able to talk to her? He could talk to himself, though months of not using his voice made it feel really weird, and for some reason he was always paranoid of someone hearing him. Just another part of Peter's stupid problem, probably.

Peter reached the top of the tall building, and scouted around for the next rooftop, which wasn't far. It probably wouldn't be a hard jump, but nevertheless Peter shifted his balance a little to sprint across the roof. Never could be too careful, he didn't want to become a grease smudge in the dirty alleys below. Peter shifted his hips and sprinted, easily making the jump and not even bothering rolling, just absorbing the shock with his legs before straightening and preparing for the next jump. In the back of his mind, he wanted his web shooters. It was way faster and easier to get around the city with those babies, not to mention fighting was probably ten times less dangerous and around five times more fun.

After a little jumping around and basically doing nothing, Peter felt his advanced intuition, better known, at least to himself, as his spider-sense, pulling at the back of his mind. He followed it instantly, trusting in completely, and too soon he fell across a basic mugging taking place. Three thugs, one little guy carrying a briefcase. He engaged the thugs, narrowly pulling both himself and the would-be victim out of the way of three bullet shots before he could get close enough to kick the gun out of the guy's hand and pressure point him to sleep.

One of the other guys charged at him with a knife, but Peter dodged to the side and twisted the guys wrist so he dropped the knife before pulling him around and knocking him into the final mugger. He wished he could have webbed them right there, but no, once again he was reminded that there were no webs for him anymore. Instead, he walked over to them and knocked their heads together. Hard.

The man they were trying to mug clutched his briefcase to his chest and watched Peter with wide eyes, so Peter raised his hand and waved casually at the guy trying to come off as non-threatening as possible while standing near the limp bodies of three bulky men he'd just taken down with ease. The guy yelped and took off running. Peter didn't know if he could rely on him to call the police, but it's not like he could do much about it, so he launched himself at a nearby building and crawled up it like so many times before.

Was it going to be a long night? Probably.

Sam would be lying if he said he wasn't both excited, and a little scared. Though, over the past three months, he seemed to be some mixture of both constantly. Meeting Captain America, sorry, Steve._ Helping two Avengers run from Hydra/SHIELD, and the subsequently strapping the wings back on and accidentally becoming an Avenger

himself. Moving into Stark, er- _Avengers_ Tower with Steve and Natasha and meeting the other three Avengers in the Tower, and then Thor himself when he returned to earth. He was just starting to get used to everything when he'd shipped off for an "abandoned" Hydra facility with Steve, Widow, and Hawkeye and then battled his first giant robot, getting out of the fight with a few minor injuries, a prideful feeling from having saved a few actual superheroes, and a crushed wing pack.

Which, of course, meant he was currently in an elevator heading for Tony_ Fucking _Stark's _personal lab_ to get a new and improved _pair of wings_ to use on his next _Avengers_ mission battling _giant robots_ or _super villains_. He might of italicized a bit too much in that last sentence but he really couldn't find it in himself to care, considering the circumstances.

The doors dinged open and he was immediately greeted with the sounds of overly-loud heavy metal music attacking him from all sides. He resisted the urge to cover his ears and tried to keep the wincing to a minimum, walking along the makeshift hallway of frosted glass panels that separated the elevator entrance into the lab floor from the actual lab. When he reached the end of the frosted glass panels, the entrance into the actual lab, he stopped, momentarily dumbstruck.

This was really not what he imagined when Tony had said 'private lab', though he supposed it probably should have been. Instead of sleek white walls and steel lab tables in neat lines, like it was on the "Candyland" floors, as Tony had labeled them, where Bruce spent most of his free time, this resembled more of a futuristic mechanics workshop. In a way, Sam supposed, it was.

Unlike other floors of the tower, there were no walls up in the lab separating the floor into rooms. Instead there were easily movable frosted glass panels around a few private areas, and more stacked again the walls for later use, but overall the floor plan was just completely open. Sam could see what looked like a kitchen area in one corner of the lab, while another corner was completely occupied by stacked broken machine parts. There were at least three full cars in the strewn parts around the lab, plus at least seven Iron Man suits, and there were seemingly random mechanic benches everywhere holding everything from tools to smoothie cups to spare parts.

Stark, of course, was in the middle of all the chaos, sitting in a spiny desk chair and playing with the same holographic technology Sam had seen installed in the penthouse suite and the Avengers recreational floor. Sam cleared his throat awkwardly, seeing as Stark hadn't seemed to have noticed him yet, but the sound didn't seem to carry over the ear-damagingly loud music. Sam didn't want to scare him, but he didn't really know how else to get his attention, so he walked forward, weaving around random mechanic benches and a few machine pieces that had scattered away from the work stations they'd been at, and reached for Stark's shoulder.

He'd just barely brushed his fingers against Stark's shoulder when the older man whirled around, a defensive look painted across his face. Sam stepped back, hands raised in a gesture of innocence. He knew Stark had plenty of reasons to not want to be snuck up on, even if he didn't know the exact specifics of those reasons, and he didn't want to push limits. Thankfully, Stark seemed to relax immediately

after seeing his face, though there were slight traces of tenseness that hadn't been there before. Sam took a few extra steps back, just in case. Never hurt to be respectful.

"Right, the wing-pack," Stark said, twirling around in the spiny chair and launching to his feet. In the background, the music volume diminished to a more tolerable decibel, which Sam was pretty sure was Jarvis' doing. "I finished it like an hour ago, where were you?"

Sam didn't know if he was supposed to follow the genius or not, but deemed it as safer if he stood where he was, at least for the moment.

"Talking to a friend."

"You could have just brought Capsicle down with you," Stark replied flippantly, waving a hand as he walked over to a workbench halfway across the floor. "It's not like I give only exclusive access. That's for the garage, where the real magic happens."

Sam blinked, not exactly sure how to respond to that, so he settled with, "Uh, it wasn't actually Cap I was talking to. A different friend, I met him a few days after moving here." Sam didn't really know how else to elaborate on his new friend. He knew next to nothing about him, including his actual name, which didn't give a lot of material besides "some random homeless kid I met in the park."

"Really?" Stark picked up something that looked a lot sleeker and more compact than Sam's previous wing pack and started walking back towards Sam. "I wouldn't have pegged you as the type to go down and talk to the people on the R&D levels, unless you're talking about somebody you met outside the Tower?"

"Outside of the Tower," Sam confessed, shifting a bit uncomfortably. Was that a bad thing? He knew being in the Avengers meant you had to be careful who you made friends with, but he kind of doubted the homeless kid he'd met on a park bench was a Hydra spy.

Stark reached him, and held out the wing pack. "I'd be careful with them, at the very least. Hydra's back, new super villains are popping into existence like there's no tomorrow, and a lot of people are going crazy about the Avengers know that we're officially becoming an actual superhero unit, like some real-life version of the Justice League. I screen everybody who comes into the Tower as precaution, but past that we can't be sure, unless you're willing to give up their name?"

Sam accepted the pack and shifted uncomfortably. For one thing, he couldn't respond to that question even if he wanted to, because he didn't know the answer. For another, he didn't know how Stark would react to learning Sam had befriended a homeless kid who may or may not be younger than eighteen.

It was the age issue that always kinda bothered Sam when he was talking to the kid. Like almost everything else about him, Sam was clueless to his real age, but he had a sneaking suspicion he was younger than eighteen. Sam had, against his better judgement, called Child Protective Services once over the issue before, but the kid had either evaded them or had turned out to be over eighteen after all,

because he'd still been sleeping on the bench two days later when Sam checked.

Sam was still pretty sure the kid was younger than eighteen, but if he was out on the streets in the first place, and avoiding Child Protective Services, he probably had a good reason to be doing so. Maybe a little convoluted and over-dramatized, as teenagers' minds tended to do, but a reason no less. Sam just hoped it wasn't because of his apparent muteness.

Fingers snapped in front of Sam's face, drawing him out of his thoughts. His attention transferred back to Tony Stark, who was standing in front of him with a mildly annoyed expression on his face. "You went off in your own world there for a second, Beaky. Are you going to spill about your friend or not?"

"It's a bit complicated," Sam said honestly, because it really was. How he'd befriended a distrustful, homeless, mute teenager who he knew nothing about was almost a mystery to him, no telling how other people would take the story. But he really liked this kid, and wanted to help him in as many ways as he could, even past bringing him cheeseburgers and giving him company from time to time.

"You use a mechanically engineered pair of metal wings to fly around and beat up bad guys while living in a skyscraper with two super spies, a living legend, a demigod, a real live Dr. Jekyll, and me, Tony Stark. Complicated is what we do."

Sam couldn't really think up an argument for that, so he just shrugged. "There's a park about seven blocks from here that I found while jogging when I'd just moved in," he ignored Starks groaning about his jogging in the background there, "and there's a kinda hidden path with a bench where this really nice mute homeless kid sleeps sometimes, and in the course of the three months I've been here I've met up with him over a dozen times somehow, and bought him at least six cheeseburgers from a McDonalds down the street from the park, and I've even started considering him my friend." Sam winced when he finished. Eleven weeks, and he was already calling the kid a friend. But to be honest, it felt appropriate saying it, though Sam's perception of friendship might be a little warped considering he could only count seven that he had right now, including the homeless kid.

"Okay," Stark said, and shrugged, turning back to his spiny chair. "You can probably hash out a plan with America on Ice for the charity thing, and I'll just throw money at the problem." Was it just his or did Tony Fucking Stark just sound self-deprecating? "Come back around when you've thought of something."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked, feeling a little confused. Like all previous conversations he'd had with Stark, this one had seemed to move a bit too fast for Sam, and he was left suspecting what the genius meant, but wishing for clarification.

Stark sent a look over his shoulder at Sam, his expression stating clearly that it should be obvious. "You're gonna help the kid, right. I've spent enough time with Cap to know that that's probably exactly what he would do, and your moral codes are almost always in sync, so..." He trailed off, but it was pretty clear to Sam the intention of the send off.

As he walked back to the elevator, he let himself muse over what Stark had said. Of course he wanted to help the kid. He just didn't really know how. And despite Stark's insistence, he and Steve were very different people. Though it wouldn't hurt to tell his nation icon of a, wow, was Captain America really his best friend at this point. Jeez. Anyway, it wouldn't hurt to tell his national icon of a best friend about the kid, but he knew any solution Steve came up with right off the bat would be something that Sam would be skeptical about, and the kid probably wouldn't go for.

Steve was both a fantastic person and a fantastic friend, but he'd opt for calling Child Protective Services, organizing a homeless shelter staying place, something like that, and Sam didn't know what it was about the kid, but he knew the normal stuff wasn't going to fit. At least, not on its own. It might have just been his dramatic side talking, but he had a feeling there was a bit more than meets the eye with this particular teenager.

3. Chapter 3

Sam lived with two super-spies, two scientists, a god, and a legendary WWII soldier who was younger than him. He knew from both instinct and experience that keeping a secret from one of them was keeping a secret from all of them, because having six (or seven, counting himself) superheroes crammed into one space meant there was a lot of cross-communication and very little regard for privacy. And keeping a secret from even one of them was almost impossible for long.

That's why he wasn't really surprised when he wandered down to the commune kitchen and found Steve Rogers waiting for him, wearing his "explain to me..." face. They sometimes went for jogs together in the morning, but Sam often woke up too late and Steve had already gone off. This didn't really bother Sam as he didn't have to deal with being constantly overshadowed by the super soldier, and that occasionally the kid was on the bench and might come jogging with him (unlikely), or provide Sam some quiet company while he cooled off from the strenuous jogs he favored (more likely).

"Tony told you about the kid," he said, because he knew Stark had, so he didn't really need to interject any note of question into the statement. Steve nodded, his facial expression solemn for some reason. Suddenly weirdly uncomfortable, Sam shifted awkwardly under his gaze. "It's not a big deal."

Because it really wasn't. His mind had wandered last night, thinking up every horrible scenario it could imagine to do with the kid and his team, from somebody (probably him) ending up with a broken arm, to extreme death and mutiny. Now that he was awake, though, he could plainly see how ridiculous this all was.

Worst case scenario, they called CPS, they checked it out, the kid got tipped off and ran away, and Sam never saw or talked to him again. While extremely undesirable, since Sam actually really liked the kid, okay, it wasn't world-shatteringly awful. Best case scenario? Well, Sam hadn't really worked that out yet, because he didn't know what would happen in his best case scenario. Hopefully the kid would end up with more stable living conditions than a

slanted park bench, though.

"What do you mean, not a big deal?" Steve asked, and he sounded genuinely curious. Sam knew why. He could very easily look at the situation from an outsiders perspective, and be shocked and saddened. Sam's go-to nickname for the kid was "the kid", which had probably implied onto Tony that he was younger than eighteen, which he probably was. Any kid left out alone on the streets was a bad thing, Sam knew, but from his more personal perspective, he wasn't really sure what to do in this specific case. He really couldn't take an outsider's perspective anymore, because it personal. He explained this to Steve.

"Look, you haven't met the kid," he started with, gently leaning against the counter to get a little more comfortable on his feet. "This probably seems really weird to you, me just letting some kid live alone on the streets, but first, I'd like to say, I've already called CPS, didn't really work out." Steve was listening attentively, a trait about him Sam really, really liked. He could listen to other people's opinions without posturing at all.

"Honestly, I don't even know the kid's real age, he very well could be over eighteen and not under the jurisdiction of Child Protective Services, though I kind of doubt it. I'm going to tell you right now, Cap, right off the bat, that if I never saw this kid again, and nobody else helped him, I think he'd be fine."

Steve blinked a little at that, and Sam could empathize why. The statement was a little shocking. "He's a smart kid, and pretty resourceful. I met him a few days after moving here, which means I met him mid-November, Cap, and I don't know how long he's been out on the streets before that, but I do know he survived being a desperate homeless kid on the streets of New York not just for three months, at the very least, but through winter while living primarily on a park bench with only one set of clothes. If we don't help him, he'll still be fine.

"My issue, more than that, is I don't want the kid to just be fine, I want him to be, at the very least, content, if not happy, and comfortable. I know it's, at the very least, a little weird to say I've befriended a random homeless kid over the period of three months and a few dozen sightings, but it looks like I have, and I really do want to see him wind up in better conditions. He deserves it."

There was an awkward pause, and Sam could feel his insides tensing up, because wow. He'd just spilled his strange, friendshippy feelings for the kid all over Steve's lap like a lovesick teenager confessing their crush. Wow. Wowwww.

Apparently he wasn't the only one who thought so, because suddenly there was slow, sarcastic clapping coming from behind him. He turned, and found Natasha standing there, looking unfairly fresh even though Sam knew she'd just woken up, the hints of a smirk tugging at her lips, and giving the most sarcastic slow clap that had ever happened in existence. "Wow," she said in a dry tone, though there was some humor buried in it. "That was beautiful. I think Cap might be tearing up a little bit. You know how emotional those oldies get."

Sam could feel Steve giving her a dirty look, even though he couldn't

see his face right now. Her lips quirked up a little bit. "How about you two go jogging for half an hour and we'll go grab breakfast before we all go meet this oh-so-spectacular homeless kid, uh?" She didn't give either of them time to respond before spinning on her heel and heading out of the kitchen. "I'll pick you boys up at the end of the trail, okay?"

So now this was a three person adventure. Sam didn't find himself minding very much, Cap and Widow were his 'crew', so to speak. He was acquainting himself closer with the rest of the team, specifically Hawkeye and Thor, since he always felt out of his depth with Tony and Bruce, like he was too stupid for them. He knew he wasn't dumb, but even listening to deep conversations between the two sometimes made his head hurt just trying to keep up. His brain just wasn't fully functional with science jargon and all that.

He followed Steve to the elevator, fidgeting nervously. He was a little apprehensive about introducing them to the kid. It's not like he was ever a huge secret Sam was trying to hide, more like he was simply something Sam'd forgotten to mention, too busy with giant robots and Hydra, and the collective chaos that was Avenger's Tower in all. But, at the same time, he kinda felt like a teenager who was introducing his girlfriend to his parents for the first time. He just really wanted them to like him.

Okay, that mental image had maybe cheered him up a little bit. Steve and Natasha as middle-aged PTA parents was admittedly a hilarious concept. Though Natasha would probably be the working mother who was just completely done with everybody's sexist bullshit, and Steve would be the nice neighborhood dad who baked cookies for everybody and bought things from terrible school fundraisers in the excuse of funding the school.

Sam was a little less nervous when the elevator dinged open and he joined Steve in the taxi he called. Steve had a different jogging path that Sam's, which wasn't a problem because they normally jogged separately due to aforementioned issues of Steve waking up at early-as-shit in the morning because of super-soldier related sleeping schedules that Sam just couldn't keep up with. Though, if he wanted to be playful, he could toss in a jab about old people waking up too early. He'd save that one for later.

Steve's separate jogging path was pretty private, ideal to the facts that one, Captain America was a public celebrity and he'd probably get pestered if he hadn't found a more secluded path, and two, so that he could go jogging in solitary and let his super soldier abilities fly free, without unfairly overshadowing anybody. Except Sam, of course.

Unfortunately, this meant not only could Sam not start jogging right off the bat once he stepped outside the Tower, this also meant a bit of a high-awkwardness situation when their driver recognized Steve and immediately started drooling on about action figures and comic books and other merchandize that quickly made Steve flush a mortified shade of red. This was prime-quality teasing material, though, so Sam filed it away for later.

It didn't take long for them to reach their destination, partly because the path wasn't too far out, partly because early-morning traffic wasn't nearly as bad as any rush hours, partly because Sam

was half-convinced their driver had broken at least three laws in an effort to get Captain America to his jogging spot ASAP. Sam wasn't complaining, as long as they didn't get flagged down by the police.

As soon as the cab pulled away from the curb, Steve gave him a shit-eating grin that was clearly trying (and failing) to disguise it's true nature, and then took off jogging a little faster than was normal for him, obviously challenging Sam to an unofficial race that he knew Sam would lose. Just for dramatic effect, Sam let out a long, heavy sigh, before taking off after him, because if he left Steve alone for more than ten minutes he might wander off unsupervised and start rescuing old ladies' cats from trees or fighting fires or something. _Ugh_, and how awful that would be.

After a long, humiliating run around the scenic area that was Steve's favorite jogging site, while he desperately tried, and failed utterly, to keep up to Steve, they met Natasha at where the path met the road once more. She was leaning against the hood of a car that was so obviously borrowed from Stark, though Sam didn't know how she'd managed that, considering the man's heavy security around his garage, and playing a game of Fruit Ninja while looking like a freaking supermodel. Y'know, _#justblackwidowthings_.

"Howdy, boys," she greeted, looking up from her game but somehow continuing to slice fruit. Sam was a little off-set, but this was pretty tame for her so he didn't make any mention of it. "You two fellas wanna go for a _ride_?"

Sam nearly choked on his own spit at the joke, but somehow still managed to catch site of both Cap's slightly confused face, and Widow's smug one. He reignited it in, straightening up and heading for the car. "I call shotgun."

"I'm driving," Natasha shot back with an air of ease he rarely saw in her outside of the Tower, or even around anybody but a few select people. "That means Cap gets the backseat." She shot him a fake sympathy-pout, and he made a sarcastic face back, and Sam found himself breaking into a smile. He was just really glad to have these two as his friends.

"So..." Widow drawled after they'd all closed their respective doors and she started up the car. "Anything in particular your homeless kid likes to eat? We're getting breakfast before dropping by to do the meet-and-greet, so may as well grab him something."

Sam didn't have to think about it, but only because he didn't know. "Nope. I know he likes bacon cheeseburgers, but that's pretty much it for food preferences." Or any preferences, really, besides the fact that he didn't like Sprite, or mayonnaise.

Or people. Sam was suddenly nervous again.

"Really?" Cap said from the backseat, leaning forward so he could participate in the conversation better. "What has this kid told you? I'd expect you to not know much about him, he's homeless, and probably antisocial, but anything? About his life before, maybe? Any family members? A last name, maybe?"

"Speaking of which, you never mentioned his first name," Widow

commented, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel. Sam caught the subtle sideways glance she shot him in curiosity.

It took Sam a moment before he realized that he'd been functioning on the assumption that Tony had somehow magically relayed every word of the conversation from last night perfectly to both of them, and that there had been nothing lost in translation and all the information he'd let slip was in their brains. Obviously, the super-genius had left at least one gaping detail out.

"Uhm, actually, he hasn't told me anything," Sam started out, and then immediately mentally slapped himself for the wording, but forged on anyway. "I thought Tony would have said that, the kid's actually mute. I know almost nothing about him, including his first name. Which is why he's just 'the kid'."

There was a pause. Sam's nervousness mounted, and then Widow let off a little huffy chuckle and said, "Okay, well that makes more sense than you purposefully hiding information from us. I was curious."

Steve hummed, 'tsk'ing a bit in the backseat. "Well, maybe make the name a priority, see if we can find anything out about him and his family members. I guess we're going to have to figure out a means of alternative communication, since we can't really just play charades with him." He turned to the front seat. "You know sign language, though, right? For Clint?"

Clint? Who was- Oh right, Hawkeye. He was deaf, right... Sam had forgotten. He didn't really interact with the archer much, just barely more than Bruce, actually. Though he was told by Jarvis that they both liked Parks and Rec, which put him in his good books automatically, since Steve didn't appreciate comedic genius and Natasha refused to watch it.

Natasha hummed a yes, presumably to Steve's question, and took a turn at the next intersection, undoubtably heading for a breakfast place she'd already picked out now that Sam had let it be known he knew shit-and-less-than-nothing about his homeless friend. At least Natasha was coming along. She'd probably be able to tell them what the kid's favorite blood type would be if he was a vampire by the time they were done talking with the him, using her freaky observational skills and all.

Okay, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration. Sam didn't regret it in the slightest, though that was mostly because he'd refrained from saying it aloud.

The car pulled into a McDonald's drive-thru. The McDonald's drive-thru. As in, the McDonald's that Sam always went to to grab the kid cheeseburgers because it was only three blocks away from the park where the kid's bench is.

"How'd you know?" Sam asked suspiciously, sending Widow a look. He could have sworn he saw a smile flicker on her face before she answered.

"It's pretty obvious. You normally come back from your jogs still sweaty and breathing hard, except for the occasional time you don't which I take it is when you sat down and talked with the kid while

recovering your breath. That means you start and stop jogging right outside the Tower, and since you mentioned a park bench he sleeps on, I figured it was the park not too far from here. There aren't that many fast breakfast options around the Tower, they're all sit-down cafÃ©s, and you did mention bacon cheeseburgers, which made me think he might have a propensity for fast food, if just for the cheapness and calories, so why not?"

Sam paused for a moment, unsure of how to respond. After a while, he shrugged and mumbled to himself. "Yeah, okay, I still think you might be psychic."

One of them, or maybe both, laughed quietly at that.

After a long enough period of time that two cars in front of them got served, Natasha broke the comfortable silence by asking, "Speaking realistically, how likely is it that your kid will be there today?"

Sam thought about that for a moment, before replying, "Iffy, I guess. He spends around half of his nights on the bench, probably because as far as crashing places for homeless kids go, it's a pretty good one, since the CPS checks homeless shelters periodically now, right?" By now, he knew that all three of them were functioning under the assumption that the kid was under eighteen until proven otherwise. Sam just-, he didn't know, really. He just kind of got that read from the kid, y'know? Like intuition. "I don't know where he crashes all the other times, but I do know that just because he spent the night on the bench doesn't mean he'll always be there in the morning, though it is more likely. Considering I saw him last night..."

"Higher than I expected," Natasha said, and when had she ordered when he hadn't noticed? All he knew was that they'd been a car behind it before, but now the order box was right next to Natasha's window and it already had red digital writing scrawled across the screen in their breakfast orders, plus a platter of pancakes for the kid. Sam had rarely bought the kid breakfast before, so he didn't know if he'd want anything like pancakes, but he doubted the kid would begrudge free food.

(He kinda also felt guilty for that thought because just because this kid wouldn't complain didn't mean Sam shouldn't put effort into getting things the kid wanted to eat. Making his life any less shitty by getting him good food was a worthy endeavor, at least in Sam's eyes. If you're going to help, you may as well go the extra mile.)

Steve was humming in the backseat now. It kinda sounded like the national anthem, and Sam was 70% certain he did these things just to fuck with Sam's head.

"Just keeping up my public image," he replied when Sam sent him an annoyed look. "After all, I am 'the most patriotic man on the planet' and 'a symbol of American pride', right?" The smug expression on his face was enough without him quoting things Sam had teased him with a few weeks back. Sam wanted to laugh, but he also wanted to kick him. Natasha took care of both for him.

He put his hand down and fiddled with the radio for a bit, but his

choices were between some strange mix of country and techno and a few news broadcasts, so he settled on the one that sounded the most interesting. It was about Spiderman, and not actually a news broadcast so much as a broadcasted talk show. He didn't mind, not really. Spiderman kinda interested him, honestly, he'd been around longer than Iron Man by around half a year, a little more, and had opened the gate for superheroes, as his public opinion changed from 'menacing vigilante' to 'coveted single hero'. He knew half of New York, maybe even the world, was just waiting for the Avengers to make the offer. The other half already though he'd turned it down.

"...strange change of behavior," somebody, probably the host, was saying. "Spiderman has always been a bit of a controversial hero, ever since his debut three years ago as a masked vigilante. Since then, majority of public opinion has changed dramatically on him, turning for the positive, though some are saying the hero has changed for the worse, in the past four months, with both the loss of his voice and his webs. Your professional opinion, as a doctor?"

"Spiderman has always been a curious specimen to me, you see. Nobody is aware who is under that mask, or if his abilities of super strength, to stick to walls, and to fire webs from his wrists are genetic or mechanic. With so many conspiracy theories floating around about him ever since his first appearance, it's hard to sort through the mess. The strangest thing about this new development, to me, who has followed his so-called 'career' for all three years, is the sudden loss of his voice. Any video you get of Spiderman earlier than the change has him constantly throwing out wisecracks or clever quips, using them as a tactic to antagonize his prey and catch them more easily, and the sudden loss of such a valuable tool that helped him win several battles is a bit baffling."

"What could have happened, do you think? Was he injured on the job, or is this perhaps a side effect of his powers? We want to hear your opinions, please call in." There was a pause. The car pulled forward one spot as the drive-in window served another person. "Hi, yes, you're on the air, what is your opinion on this sudden change in Spiderman's behavior?"

"I think the real Spiderman was abducted by aliens and this is an impostor in his costume unable to speak our human languages and unable to shoot webs like the original could."

"...Well, that is certainly an interesting possibility, thank you for calling in your opinion. And the next caller...Hi, yes, you're on the air?"

"_Maybe Spiderman's a Muslim and-_

The caller was abruptly cut off as Natasha pressed the radio off. "Sorry, I'm not in the mood for abundant casual racism today, thanks."

Natasha drove the car forward again as the one in front of them moved. They were now one car away from the paying window, and Sam dug his wallet out of his pocket and handed it wordlessly to Natasha, who accepted it just as silently. Steve leaned forward from the backseat again. "It is a bit interesting. Spiderman has been doing this for

even longer than Tony, though he's only localized, I know SHIELD had taken an interest in him before it went down, even noticing the weird silence spell that's happened recently. They didn't find out who he was, though. Thank god."

Sam blinked as he was suddenly hit with the realization that _of course_ SHIELD/Hydra would be looking into Spiderman, and if they had found out who he was... well, his secret identity would have been uploaded onto the internet, along with all of the other SHIELD files they'd released. Jesus. He'd figured the most affected people would be Natasha and Clint and the other SHIELD assassins, since every dirty mission they'd ever completed would be public information, but there were other masked vigilantes out there, though none as coveted as Spiderman, who had probably been unmasked by the information upload. Yikes.

"I'm interested in him purely on the fact that he stole my schtick," Natasha said in a completely dry voice, though Steve and Sam both knew it was a joke and chuckled accordingly. "It _is_ a little weird," she continued, digging through Sam's wallet for money to pay for their breakfast. "I know he was briefly considered for the Avengers Initiative, but SHIELD passed him up on the basis that there was a large chance he'd say no because we'd want to know his secret identity. We could have, of course, forced him, but working with an ally that has a reason to hate you is worse than working against an enemy that does."

Steve perked up. "He was considered for the Avengers? I didn't know that much, all I know is that Tony is pretty interested in him, from what I've seen of his project file 'Spider2'. Though it might just be jealousy of having come after Spiderman in the superhero vigilante race of who came first. I'm not sure."

They pulled up to the pay window and Natasha handed over the cash with a mumbled "keep the change". The young woman nodded, smiling politely, before doing a double-take and both Steve and Natasha, whose faces were both visible due to the fact that Steve was sitting at the edge of his seat and leaning forward. Her eyes darted to Sam, brows furrowing in confusion, which made a bit of sense since Sam hadn't made his official debut as a new Avenger yet. Natasha smirked at her and rolled the window up, no doubt looking incredibly cool to the girl. At least she cut off the weird, unintentional staring match Sam had gotten into with the girl. That would have gotten awkward fast.

"You're going to have to roll that window down again pretty soon," Steve told her. Natasha actually turned her head to give him an annoyed look, instead of just using the mirrors to do it, and Steve backed off, holding his hand up in a gesture of innocence, though it was obvious by his facial expression that he wasn't _that_ repentant.

Natasha opened the door instead of rolling the window down when they got to the food window, and Sam nearly lost his shit. Steve was chuckling in the backseat. There was an annoyed honk from behind them and she stared at the car in annoyance before flipping them off. Around seven seconds later Sam heard a muffled "Holy shit, was that the Black Widow?!_" and Natasha came back with food, shoving it all in Sam's lap and then buckling herself back in and pulling out of the drive-thru. Steve started humming the national anthem again and Sam

threw a little carton of syrup at him. He caught it in midair, the reflexively-advanced bastard, and laughed good-naturedly. By then they'd reached the park, and Widow somehow had no difficulty finding a parking place nearby. Sam swore it was one of her hidden superpowers.

Natasha and Steve had no problem getting out of the car, but Sam had to sit and wait like an awkward prom date because he had all the heaps of food in his lap (three meals just for Steve because he had a freakishly big metabolism), and if he tried to get up now he would spill it all over the concrete and then their excursion would be for nothing.

The fact that he was tempted to stand anyway when Steve came around and smirked at him showed how good an influence these two were on him. At least Natasha was helpful.

At least until they reached the hill the bench was on and Natasha made an annoyed sound at the steepness, though Sam knew she would only do it in a relaxed situation, and shoved the food into Steve and Sam's hands before following them up the unintended path, her heels click-clacking rhythmically on the weathered concrete.

About halfway up, Sam's anxiety decided, *_haha, no, how about one more round before this is all over for today?_* and sucker-punched him in the gut. What if the kid *_wasn't_* there? Not only would they have wasted a tray of perfectly good (or as good as they got) McDonald's pancakes, but Steve and Natasha had wasted a trip. Plus, the inevitable worry that Sam always got when he checked the bench and the kid wasn't there was bound to creep up. Like, *_logically_*, he knew that he was a homeless kid, and it made sense that he would wander, but at the same time... Sam worried, goddammit! He was an unrepentant worrying mother hen, and they all knew it.

Oh god. Thank fuck. The kid was dozing softly on the bench, his face smushed lightly against the old wood. He looked kind of wet, and Sam realized dully that it had rained lightly last night, probably freezing cold rain, considering the time of year. February was not a nice time to sleep outside, and if the kid had been here all night. he probably would have been freezing cold and very wet under the light shower.

Why had Sam never thought of this before?

"So... do we wake him up, or...?" Steve trailed off, glancing to Sam curiously.

"I'm not patient enough to wait," Natasha decided, and pulled the pancakes she'd ordered out of the bag Steve was holding. She strode forward, popping the lid off the styrofoam make-shift container that held the breakfast, and sliding the tray holding the pancakes under the kid's nose. There was about a half a second's pause, and then the kid's eyes shot open.

4. Chapter 4

Peter woke up to something he was definitely not used to. The smell of food. More accurately, the smell of non-rotting food that actually seemed appetizing. His eyes shot open, because if this was the

after-effect of a dream, he was going to be both saddened at waking up with no food, and impressed that his mind could conjure up such a good illusion of smell.

It wasn't an illusion of smell. (Smellusion. No, that was stupid.) Instead, right in front of his face was what looked like actual food. Pancakes, if he could see it correctly, but the platter was really close to his eyes so he didn't really know. It was food, though. Being held from falling off the bench and therefore away from him by an arm. An arm that belonged to a redheaded lady who was looking at him with an unimpressed expression.

Needless to say, Peter was confused.

Somebody cleared their throat awkwardly. Peter followed the sound until his eyes settled on another man, standing behind the red-haired lady. His man. Well, not his man. His friend. Sam.

Why was Sam back so soon? Why were there two extra people with him. Why was Peter getting woken up by pancakes at who-knows-when after a grueling patrol as Spiderman while getting soaked by the rain? Though it wasn't like it was the first time, so at least he was used to it.

"He-ey," Sam stretched out the word, shifting his weight like he was uncomfortable. "Sorry, I tattled on you with some of my friends and they wanted to meet you. We brought you breakfast, though," he offered tentatively, like he thought Peter might turn them away. Ha. Ha ha_ ha._

Peter sat up, pulling his head back first to make sure he didn't dislodge the plate of pancakes from the bench, since the red-head had stopped holding them once Sam had started talking. He swiveled his torso to grab the plate and then scooted to the bottom end of the bench, pressing himself against the railing so the others could sit down. Four normal people could probably fit on the bench with a little squish, but he doubted muscle-man blondie over there would fit considering Sam was already a bit on the muscular side and that was only made up for how skinny Peter was. Maybe he'd sit sideways? Peter didn't really want to sit on the ground after the little scrape his leg had gotten in that failed attempt at a building jump last night. He _had_ to be more careful with that.

Thankfully, Big Blondie seemed to pick up on the fact that he wouldn't fit, especially since the redheaded lady had already sat down on the higher side of the bench, scooting over for one of them to take a seat. Big Blondie took it gracefully in stride, and (also) gracefully, and took a seat on the path right in front of the bench, opposite of Sam, who'd taken a seat between Peter and red-hair.

"Kid, meet Steve and Natasha," Sam introduced, pulling an easy smile. Peter relaxed minutely. This was Sam, a friend, and Sam's friends. It was fine, he was fine, everything was fine.

"Pleasure to meet you, I'm Natasha," Big Blondie said, sticking a hand out. Peter knew that was a joke, and an earlier version of himself would have laughed. This version of himself was too busy trying to place the vague familiarity Peter felt when he looked at Big Blondie. Where had he seen him before?

Big Blondie withdrew his hand before Peter registered it was to shake, but the humiliation was enough to draw him out of his suspicion. Vague familiarity would happen with any New Yorker that hung around this park, and since Sam jogged here almost every day, it wasn't hard to figure out he probably lived somewhere near here. His friend probably did too.

Peter extended his hand as automatic courtesy when his brain registered the polite gesture, but by then Steve (at least he was assuming this one was Steve, unless he was actually Natasha and Peter was being presumptuous) had long-since withdrawn his hand, and the awkwardness of the whole situation went up another couple of notches when he quickly withdrew his hand just as Steve started to raise his again.

_**Jesus**__._

"You wouldn't mind telling us your name, would you," came Natasha's (hopefully) voice from the other side of Sam, and Peter seized a little in panic, because this was just fantastic. Before he could do anything, though, Steve (probably) moved from his position on the ground and rummaged around in the grass a little until he found a long but slender stick and handed it to Peter.

"Just use this to spell it out." There was a small pause, and then Steve (likely) winced a little bit. "There's no dirt around for you to spell it in. Well, I'm embarrassed."

Oh, _he _was embarrassed, huh? Glad to see they were both on the same page, then. Steve (almost definitely) was only in this situation because of Peter's stupid nonfunctional vocal chords.

Peter thought for a moment, debating the benefits of spelling it out on his pancakes in syrup, but decided that was too messy so he took the stick in both hands and broke it into tiny pieces. Steve (yes) made a small sound of protest in the back of his throat before Peter bent as far as he could without touching his pancakes with his stomach and dropped three pieces of the branch strategically so they formed a very crude 'P' shape.

Sam made a sound of acknowledgement and grabbed the pancakes to make it easier for Peter to lean down. Peter kind of didn't want them to go, because he was now feeling possessive over McDonald's pancakes, apparently, but he let Sam take them because he trusted he would give them back once Peter was finished.

Once the pancakes were out of the way, Peter leaned down a little further and fixed the 'P', adding an 'E', a 'T', and another 'E' before he ran out of twigs, so he borrowed the 'P' from the beginning and the top of the 'T' to make an 'R'.

"Peter?" Steve repeated curiously, and Peter sucked his bottom lip between his teeth, worrying it gently between the two rows of bone.

"Peter," Sam repeated, and then jostled him playfully on the shoulder and handed him back his pancakes, along with a hash brown and some butter and syrup. "It fits you."

Peter wouldn't know what to say to that even if he could, so he grabbed one of the plastic silverware packets and ripped it open to get at the cheap plasticware, grabbing the tools and immediately starting on his pancakes. He could see Sam smiling at him out of the corner of his eyes, and ignored the warm feeling in his stomach because of it, passing it off as simply a side effect of the warm food after such a cold night. He was definitely not attached to the man sitting next to him on his slanted bench.

Much.

There were four pancakes the stack, and Peter drenched them in syrup and artificial butter, trying not to think about much better pancakes from days before this whole mess, with Uncle Ben and Aunt May. He would not get emotion over pancakes. He would not....

God, she must be so worried right about now, and it was all his fault. She'd be living all on her own in that house built for three, looking at photographs and-

Stop it, Peter. No. No. Thinking about it wasn't going to do anything but make him feel worse than he already did.

"Hey, you alright?" Sam gently nudged Peter's shoulder with his own, giving him a little half smile, and Peter waited a moment, long enough for Steve and Natasha to stop their conversation about falcons or whatever and look over, before shrugging and tilting his head to the side a bit. The correct answer was no. The right answer was this.

Sam hesitated for a little while before saying, "...Okay," in a voice that told Peter he wasn't as good at acting as he wished he was. That, or Sam could just read him well.

He went back to his pancakes, focusing on the conversation around him more than his memories this time. It was kind of nice to hear it in the background. New York was, by no means, silent, but there were very rarely voices in the background, instead it was honking cars and clanking construction at all hours.

He finished the first pancake just as the conversation got back to peak. It wasn't about birds this time, either, it was about Steve's friend.

"I'm worried about him," Steve was saying, gesturing a bit widely with a worried expression on. "He's just gotten free, he's all alone, probably confused, and..." The blond trailed off, taking a bite of his McMuffin while he frowned at nothing.

"He'll be fine," Natasha reassured him, having just swallowed a bite of her own breakfast. "Look, he can take care of himself, he's a big boy. Like you said, he's probably confused. And, he's free for the first time in a long time, and probably feeling horribly guilty. Be patient and he'll probably come to you."

From what Peter could figure, Steve's friend had just gotten out of prison from doing something, though Peter didn't know what yet. Since Natasha had looked a bit unsettled during the conversation, and since she, Sam, and Steve all talked about the friend like he was around their age, Peter figured maybe it was like a group thing

they'd done in college, maybe the friend had taken it too far and gotten imprisoned or something.

He wasn't a detective, okay? They were all pretty young, though, so it at least it wasn't murder. Probably.

Peter finished his second pancake. After the food from last night, he should be feeling full by now. Too bad he had a spider metabolism, and a spider's night habits to boot. He didn't eat the things he caught, though. Thankfully.

The conversation had faded to a comfortable stop, and Natasha was leaning around Sam to look at him. Peter paused in his eating to show his attentiveness to her since it would take a lot longer to show otherwise, without the use of his voice.

"What would happen if I called Child Protective Services on you?"

Peter froze, the plastic fork falling from his hand and clattering against the concrete of the path near the bench. No. Oh no, oh no, _oh no_. If Sam's friend called CPS, she could probably drag Sam into believing it was for the best, but it _wasn't_. If they called them, they'd drag Peter back to the Millers or somebody as equally horrible, only with more security and a lot of questions. Or, if, like times before, Peter could outrun them, he'd still have to relocate, abandon the bench entirely, along with his 'new' friend, and settle in for another lonely six months before his life even had the slightest potential of becoming better. As if the first four months of homelessness hadn't been bad _enough_, _and over half of that was _with_ Sam.

H'd known it was too good to last.

"Well that answers that question," Natasha said, and leaned back in her seat, looking to Sam. "He's under eighteen, and he _is_ avoiding the CPS."

Uhm, huh? _What?_ Was that... Had that been a test? What was happening? Was she going to call CPS or not? Did he need to run after all?

"Why?" The question drew Peter's attention, and he saw Sam looking at him with strangely vulnerable eyes, it was times like this when Peter felt slightly thankful for the invisible hand clamped on his vocal chords when around people. He could simply pretend like this was another side effect of his muteness rather than him avoiding the question.

"Why are you avoiding Child Protective Services, Peter?" Sam asked again, while trying to initiate eye contact that Peter was just as diligently trying to avoid. The way he said Peter's name, Peter kind of regretted giving it to him when a wave of guilt swept over him after Sam used it. Like, "late to Aunt May's curfew" levels of guilt. And it was only his first name, too.

Sam, sweet, well-meaning Sam, who was a hard working, retired veteran who did his best to help everyone around him, might understand why Peter had to run away from the Millers to continue as Spiderman. If Peter had the time, the courage, and the voice to tell him. But he

had none of that, and especially not when he'd just met two of Sam's other friends. Maybe never.

He shoved the guilt wave down viciously, hating himself for it as he did. Sam didn't need any of that baggage anyway, and Peter didn't tell Harry or MJ or Aunt May, who'd all known him longer. Why had he even considered it as an option?

"That's alright, sorry for intruding," Sam said softly, sighing, and he was too good for Peter. He was too good for the world, really. Forgiving, selfless, brave, charitable... He deserved to be, like, the emperor of the world in his next life, or something. Goddamn.

Peter went back to his breakfast. He wished his emotions would stop ruining his appetite. It was becoming a serious problem, and the pancakes would be harder to save for later. Dang, he really needed the calories.

"You dropped this," said a voice, and Peter glanced around to see Steve handing him his fork with a placating face on. Peter, out of nowhere, was hit with another blast of sudden recognition. He knew he'd seen Steve somewhere before, but he could remember where, and it was driving him crazy.

Peter took the fork after what was probably a little too long. Whoops. At least the guilt he'd been feeling had been overtaken by awkwardness and curiosity, enough so that he could probably stomach the rest of his pancakes. It was a silver lining, at least.

Peter ate in complete silence while his companions went back to chatting amicably about everything from the weather to TV shows. He listened, not really caring about the conversation's topic, seeing as he couldn't very well join in anyway. Or at least, he didn't care much until the topic of conversation turned to him.

"I thought he covered Manhattan and Queens, and ventured out into the other boroughs occasionally as well, but lately he's just been sticking to Manhattan. It's a little concerning," Steve was saying.

Natasha shrugged. "It probably has a lot to do with the recent change. The loss of his webs and voice. His main transportation form was the webs, which means now he's grounded and has to make his way around like a normal person, or as he's been doing it, jumping from building roofs. It isolates him to a single area per night, and restricted movement during the day, since he's probably got a day job or occupation, too. Means he's stuck in one area now."

Sam hummed in agreement. "Yeah, whatever happened has really affected where he can go and what he can do, but at least he didn't disappear entirely. though we don't really know what happened to make the change happen." Sam turned to him and tilted his head. "What do you think?"

Peter stared at him, the irony of the situation faintly registering in the back of his mind. His best friend, a retired army veteran that barely knew Peter's name, was asking the mute, homeless version his opinion on the restricted movement of the newly mute, masked vigilante version of him. Peter would have laughed if he didn't feel

so sick to his stomach.

"Uhm," Sam was giving him a worried look. "You haven't been very social today." Peter almost snorted, because he really wasn't social any day, he was homeless and couldn't speak. Though he could see what Sam meant, he hadn't even made an effort to communicate so far, which was pretty bad, looking back.

Peter shrugged at Sam, twisting his lips a little and making an aborted motion with his head. He didn't really know how else to respond. It wasn't anything specific, just a mixture of everything, from Sam's sudden surprise friends, to Peter still-hurting leg and cold, damp clothes, to the fact he'd been asked about his own alter ego. Just... everything.

"Are you tired?" Natasha asked, leaning around Sam to look at him. "Do you need any or all of us to leave? If you do, just ask."

"Yeah," Steve chimed in from the ground. "We kinda unfairly sprung this on you, and if you want us to leave, all you need to do is tell us, don't worry about it. It's up to you."

Peter was starting to see how these two were Sam's friends. Maybe. He shrugged vaguely at them and went back to his food, hoping that they wouldn't leave. He wouldn't blame them if they did, though. He wasn't very good company.

They all stared at him a moment, seeing if he would do something else, but when he didn't, they all went back to their meals as well. Peter side-eyed Steve's massive portions jealously, knowing that half a year before he could've eaten it all and had room for another round. The only thing that had changed between then and now was that he'd become more active, but he used to eat only half a meal every few days. His stomach had shrunken to accommodate that, and he was both grateful and resentful of that fact.

Oh, whoops. Steve had noticed his lingering look. Peter quickly switched his gaze down to look at the ground, avoiding Steve's eyes, and quickly drew his knee back when Steve's hand brushed against it.

"If you want some of mine, that's no problem," the older man offered politely, holding up half of the breakfast sandwich. "I probably have too much food here anyway."

Sam let off a badly concealed snort, letting Peter know that statement was completely untrue. A little weird, since even somebody Steve's side should only be eating half of what he had, but Peter wasn't questioning it. He was trapped between politeness and hunger, wanting to take the offered food but feeling that he shouldn't, but Steve had already torn off the bitten-at edges of the sandwich and was practically forcing it into his hands. Peter pressed his lips together, feeling guilty, but he didn't think Steve would accept it if he tried to give it back.

Maybe he'd find another homeless person that needed it more than him, like he'd done with the burger from last night. Even after a long patrol, hungry and tired, going back to it brought up the reason why he hadn't finished it in the first place. He would have eaten it

eventually, but it turned out he hadn't been the only homeless person in the park that night. He'd felt guilty giving the woman a half chewed in burger, but he'd eaten much worse, maybe thanks to his advanced metabolism, but she'd looked like she'd been homeless a hell of a lot longer than he had. She needed it more.

Peter still had hope, at the very least, a luxury not afforded to others in his situation. His eighteenth birthday. His aunt had refused to touch the money his parents had left him until she'd had to pay off the hospital bill, which still left him with some money from his parents' work. Should be enough to buy a new camera, to replace the one the Millers still had "confiscated", along with his phone, keys, and wallet. Jeez, they'd been awful. Though, admittedly it probably wouldn't have been as bad if they didn't think he was in a gang of something because of the lateness and bruises caused by his night job.

It's not like they were wrong, per say. Hey wasn't in a gang, of course, but it's not like he wasn't doing something illegal. He'd just been cleared to do it as a speciality case, for whatever reason. He wasn't complaining, not getting trash thrown at him anymore made this horrible stage in his life a little better, but he was a tad confused.

That wasn't the only thing he was confused about. Peter looked back at the three adults. He could maybe understand Sam being a good samaritan and putting up with him just because he was a good person, but Steve and Natasha seemed remarkably accepting of him, even if they were a little weird. He was a little weird too, so it was all good.

Except he kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. What did they want from him? Whatever it was, he couldn't give it to them. He'd make a bad friend, not being able to communicate and all, and a charity case he was not. CPS would have a hell of a time catching him, even if these guys told 'em, but at this point he was kind of doubting they'd put out the effort. So why were they still here?

Peter finished his pancakes, and scooped up all the extra syrup and crumbs off the styrofoam plate before setting it aside for later disposal. He flicked his tongue a little inside his mouth, feeling weird. It's been a while since he'd had anything sweet, like syrup. Mostly it was just hotdogs, chips, and the meals Sam brought him. If Peter ever truly got out of this mess, he was never eating another New York hot dog again, cheapness be damned.

Sam's arm was lightly brushing his, due to the closeness required for all three of them to fit on the bench, instead of just two. Peter thought he would have minded more than he did, since lately most of the touches he'd been on the receiving end of were painful, but he was surprised to find that it was fine. Maybe even good, if he was stretching. Nice. Comfortable, actually. It was bad-weird, just... weird.

Something nudged his shoulder, and Peter glanced over to see Natasha giving a meaningful look at the half of the breakfast sandwich still clenched in Peter's hand. Her eyes flickered up to his for a little bit, and Peter was surprised to find very little judgement or pressure in them. God, these two were just as good as Sam, weren't they? He didn't know if he could handle two more friends. He'd

already blown the last several he'd been allowed.

After another moment of Natasha staring at him while the other two joked about something in the background, he shrugged a little and lifted the breakfast sandwich to his lips. He pretended not to notice the small smile that flickered across her lips for a second before it disappeared for a more neutral expression. Dang, he was already attached, He'd just met them like half an hour ago, what was wrong with him?

They didn't even leave after he'd finished the sandwich half. They stuck around, talking, laughing, slowly drawing them into their web (and wasn't that ironic), until he was sure almost two hours, if not more, had passed. At that point they'd all rearranged their positions several times to get Steve up off the ground, and then back on it again, this time with Sam using him as a chair, or with Natasha perched on the back of the bench with Peter crowded in the middle of a muscle-man sandwich. Somewhere in the middle of all of it, Peter found himself more engaged with these people than he'd felt in months, even before Aunt May's heart attack. Feeling a little less horrible. Like he'd said before, it was weird, but not, by any means, bad.

Just, weird.

5. Chapter 5

"How was Sam's homeless kid?" Hawkeye asked as soon as the elevator dinged open to the Avenger's Rec floor. His head isn't even turned from the TV screen where he was playing some sort of first person shooter game on. Sam could see the glint of his metallic purple hearing aid in his ear from the weird way his head was angled. He wondered how he'd known it was them.

"He's looking at the reflection in the top of the TV border," Natasha mumbled under her breath, a tick of affectionate amusement leaking into her tone. She stepped out of the elevator, quickly followed by Sam and Steve, right before the smooth metallic doors clicked shut behind them.

Jane Foster looked up from her position curled up in a giant bean bag, a National Geographic magazine clutched in her hands. "Yeah, actually, I'm a little curious too. Sounds interesting."

Sam didn't know her that well, besides knowing that she was dating Thor, and that she'd shown up at the Tower a little after Thor had, because Tony had offered her a similar deal to Bruce: awesome living conditions, huge science labs to research and study in, and, of course, she'd have free and easy access to Thor. Sam was pretty sure that last part hadn't been offered to Bruce, but who knew? The Norse God was attractive.

He also knew that she'd brought two people with her, a permanent fixture to the Tower, Darcy Lewis, who Pepper said was a blessing in disguise, because she made the best muffins on the planet and was a master Scientist Wrangler, which meant Pepper didn't have to spend half of her time trying to keep Tony alive. The second was a less permanent presence, Eric Selvig, who lived in an apartment out of the Tower for privacy issues but allegedly spent a lot of time in the

labs, sometimes pantsless. Sam did his best not to judge, he didn't really know that much about the science process. Plus, Loki had apparently mind-fucked the dude so who knew, really?

"How do you know about that?" Sam's mouth said, though Sam's brain caught on a second later and made him wince, as if that would make anything better.

She didn't seem to mind, though, and just shrugged. "Thor told me."

Well, that made sense. "How did Thor find out," he wondered, wandering into the floor more and leaning against the back of the couch.

"Bruce told him," Hawkeye piped up from the couch, viciously shooting an alien in the face. Did he not get enough of that working as an Avenger? "I learned about it eavesdropping on Stark when he told Pepper, and I know she told Bruce, and Happy and Rhodey, or at least I think those are their names, and Bruce told Thor who told Jane and Darcy, and Darcy told Selvig. I told Nat about it, of course," he tilted his head towards the redhead woman who'd taken a seat next to his on the couch. "She told Steve, who I'm pretty sure was the last to know, unless I'm forgetting somebody."

"The Avenger's rumor mill, everybody," another voice called out, and Sam turned to see Darcy standing in the counter-space between the kitchen and the living room area, holding what looked like a cherry Icee from Target, going by the design on the cup. "This Icee sucks, by the way."

"Then why'd you buy it?" Hawkeye taunted back as another alien exploded on the screen. Sam was kinda confused.

Apparently it showed on his face, because Jane looked from her magazine again and said, "While you guys were out talking to your homeless kid—" and why did everybody keep calling Peter his homeless kid? "-Clint, Darcy, Thor, and I all went out to meet this weird video game developer who's trying to market a game where you can play as an extra Avenger during the Alien invasion. I don't really see the appeal but, eh," she shrugged, "That's just me. Anyway, he gave us like ten copies for free, plus his phone number so that we could call back and give him tips and stuff. Then Darcy insisted on driving to Target so she could buy a new handbag since the last one got ruined during that whole blue sludge mess—"

"Which you caused, by the way," Darcy interjected. Sam had no idea what they were talking about, but Steve looked confused as well, which made him feel a little better.

"A simple chemical reaction, Darce," Jane shot back, a hint of affection playing in her tone. "The stains cleaned out after a few hours, it wasn't even a problem."

Darcy made a protesting sound, waving the Icee around. "Oh, they may have faded, but they did not clean out. Not only that, but I couldn't even get a Blue Raspberry Icee, which is my favorite flavor, because it was like the exact same shade of blue, so I had to settle for cherry, which, may I add, does not taste like actual cherries at all!"

"_Oh no_," Jane muttered sarcastically, going back to the National Geographic. Darcy stuck her tongue out at the back of Jane's head.

"As for the game," Hawkeye interjected, drawing Sam's attention back to him. "It's fine, so far. A little buggy, I guess. The character he's built around Steve is fucking hilarious, and Nat's over-sexualized, but what else is new? I also think he's aiming to imply that Nat and I are fucking, which is funny because I wasn't even _there_," _the mood sobered a bit, everybody's minds going to the reason why Hawkeye wasn't there for the first part, but he ignored it and powered on. "And since I wasn't seen in the battle much, he just made up my appearance, which is so far from what I actually look like that it's laughable, but eh," another alien's head exploded, "It's okay. I'm telling Stark to no-go it, though."

"Wait, what?" Sam blinked. "Why would Stark be no-going it?"

It was Natasha who looked up and answered this time, "Stark grabbed the merchandising rights to the Avengers brand as soon as it because clear people were going to profit off of it. Plus, at of our individual merchandising rights, and he's holding the rights for a few superheroes who didn't think to grab them themselves, at least until he can transfer them legally to them. Spiderman, Daredevil, War Machine, maybe a few others. He wanted to make sure we were 'at least making a profit off of all the ridiculous shit they put out'." Natasha shrugged. "He puts a sixth of the profits into each of our bank accounts, and all of the profits from solo merchandise in. I'm sure as soon as the press catches wind of you, you'll get a cut too."

"Really?" Sam asked, blinking. He hadn't heard of this before now, and he was surprised.

"Yeah, I was pretty shocked too," Steve spoke up, from where he'd sat down at the other side of Natasha. "Before I was just going off of the funds SHIELD set up for me to explore, but when they took the fall Stark told me that he had this fund set up for all the Captain America merchandise that Howard had apparently set up to gather the profits for me, and," Steve shook his head, letting off a low whistle. "Wow. Who knew how many people were interested in Captain America."

"Everyone," Natasha replied in a dry voice, her eyebrow arching up. "Especially since you've gotten even more famous since the forties, and the fact that you're back is driving everybody absolutely insane, which means Captain America merch is selling off the shelves at a surprising rate, doing better than Avenger's merch in some states. Though in New York even you are lagging behind Spiderman in profits. Hometown hero bonus, I guess. Plus the fact that he wasn't affiliated with SHIELD in any ways, since the public view on them kinda sucks after the data breach."

"Wow," Sam said. He didn't really know how to articulate his feelings otherwise. He'd never really thought about the profits from superhero merchandising until right this moment, but he supposed it made sense. He'd seen a lot of Avengers merchandise around, even before he'd started living at the Tower. Going jogging, he's seen people in T-shirts and hats, and action figures and toy weapons were out for

sale, and other stuff too. He supposed with the high level of interest in the Avengers, it would make a lot of money, and the person who held the merchandising rights would get a pretty large cut of that money.

"Yeah," Hawkeye agreed as he hit a violent series of buttons on the game controller. A moment later, a series of explosions went off on the screen, and then a screen full of dialogue came up, signifying that the game was over. Hawkeye tossed the game controlled aside and turned the TV off with the remote set on the coffee table, stretching and leaning over to set his head on Natasha's lap. "Okay, but seriously, how was the homeless kid."

"Nice." Natasha carded a hand through his hair, amusement tugging on her lips. "You didn't tell me he could speak."

"What?" Hawkeye asked, blinking. The rest of the occupants of the room, including Thor, who had emerged out of the kitchen floor, apparently, since Sam hadn't noticed him when they'd first come in, and the big blonde was pretty noticeable most of the time.

"Yeah," Steve chimed in, leaning back a little and stretching his arms over his head. "He's mute, actually. Did Tony not mention that when you were eavesdropping on him?" The way he said that last part felt like it should have conveyed disapproval, but his tone was absent of any such thing. That was all fine and good, because if Steve had interjected disapproval into his tone, Sam probably would have laughed. Though he was Captain America, and a really classy guy, he wasn't as much of a goody-two-shoes, patriotic, pacifist as the stories portrayed him as. Looking back on it, it was kind of hard to believe the guy who'd allegedly punched Hitler in the face was a heavenly angelic pacifist, and Sam internally snorted at his past self for believing any of it.

Hawkeye had a contemplative look on his face, his lips quirking to the side a bit. "I... don't know? Maybe he mentioned it. I don't think so."

"Well it was obviously lost in translation somewhere," Darcy drawled, taking another sip of her cherry Icee and then grimacing and frowning at the cup. "Probably Tony, since that's where we all heard it from, unless Sam forgot that little detail." She pointed her index finger of the hand holding the Icee cup at him and raised an eyebrow. Sam shook his head in response, he was sure he'd mentioned that to Tony. Well, mostly sure.

The lights flashed, suddenly, accompanied by a weird little beeping sound. Sam made a noise of surprise and stumbled back a little, staring up at the ceiling incredulously. The lights had gone back to normal. "What just happened?" he asked.

Steve was standing up off the couch, while Hawkeye had pulled his head off of Nat's lap and was fiddling with his hearing aid, looking at the ceiling expectantly. Sam took it that he was probably waiting for Jarvis to say something, since Steve and Natasha were also looking slightly up like they did when they were addressing the AI. "What just happened?" he repeated.

"I apologize, Mr. Wilson," came the polite, accented voice of Tony's fake ceiling butler. "Sir has installed a warning system into

all of the 'Avengers' floors, as he has labeled them, whenever I detect supervillain activity. The light affect is for the benefit of Mr. Barton, when he is without hearing aid. There seems to be an unidentified seemingly sentient gooey substance attempting to dissolve several billboards in Times Square, along with the presence of several people who seem to be members of the Advanced Idea Mechanics group, who seem to be attempting to herd it. No superhero presence has been detected near it as of yet, though Sir has already set out, and invited all of you to, quote, 'join the party'. Will any of you be heading out as well?"

Sam took a moment to let that sink in, breathing a deep exhale. "This place is an actual real-life Hall of Justice, isn't it?" he said, running a hand over his head and maybe letting out a bit of a hysterical laugh. "I'm surprised Tony didn't name you Alfred."

Darcy let off a bark of a laugh, nudging Jane's shoulder. "That'd make you Lois Lane, then," she joked, obviously trying to lighten Sam's mood a bit. He appreciated the effort, took a deep breath through his nose, and then followed Steve to the elevator like a lost puppy. Hawkeye and Natasha crowded in next to them, and she nudged his shoulder gently. Though she didn't smile at him, Sam appreciated that gesture for what it was, too.

Hey, if he was going to be on a team of superheroes, he may as well be good friends with them. It made him reconsider putting distance between himself and most of the rest of the Avengers, but he wasn't really sure if they'd want to be friends with _him._

The elevator let them off at various floors. It was kind of awkward, waiting in the elevator one at a time so they could go get changed into their superhero gear to go fight some sentient goop. He felt like they should be sliding down poles, fireman style, or something. Maybe have some intense backtrack playing in the background. Instead they had soft, tasteful Beethoven playing in the background that Sam was sure Pepper had picked out, and the world's deadliest archer was tapping his foot next to him as he waited for the elevator to pull to a stop so Captain America could get off.

When had this become his life?

The elevator stopped off at his floor, and Natasha dropped off with him. He gave her a questioning look, but she just quirked her lips a little and shrugged. "I already have everything I need," she told him as the elevator doors shut softly beside them. "Clint needs to get his bow, and Cap needs his shield, and then they'll drive out there on the motorcycle. All I need is transportation, and you're the perfect candidate, since with the wings you're a bit faster than one of Stark's muscle cars." She brushed past him, heading for the full-bay windows at the edge of his floor. Sam blinked again. He thought he might be going into shock, at least a little bit. This was a bit much to process.

A few seconds later he shook out of it and headed for the closet Stark had set up on his floor to contain everything related to his combat persona, he guessed. Everything related to Falcon. His wing pack, various Kevlar vests and halfway armored pants, combat boots... stuff like that. He grabbed one of each, from the closet, strapping his new, improved wing pack onto his back. It was probably going to be a little rough on the flight over, since he wasn't really

accustomed to it. He'd tested it out last night, briefly, seeing how much lighter and easier it was to control, and the visor-helmet Stark had added, which would really help with the wind in his eyes problem, but it'd still take a little getting used to. He hoped that wouldn't be too much of a problem.

When he rushed back to the window area of his floor, Natasha had managed to get open of them open and was standing near the edge without a care in the world, like she wasn't about experience a ninety-eight story fall if she took one step forward. Sam extended the wings as he walked briskly towards her, and she took a step to the side so he could have easier access to the window.

He didn't really have much experience carrying people while flying. His arms were occupied by his wings, which meant the most logical position would probably be for Natasha to climb onto his back and wrap her arms around his neck for support. She figured this out even quicker than he did, and that's what she was doing a second before he came to that conclusion. In flight, like this, he'd have to stay pretty level, with no jerky movements if he wanted her to be safe, but that wasn't really much of a problem.

He took the last step, pushing off the floor with as much oomph as his leg muscles could manage, extending his wings fully as soon as they were clear of the Tower. There was a moment while he was extending where gravity struck them and they were falling, but as soon as the air caught his wings fully they started sailing easily, much easier than it would have been if he was carrying somebody with his other wing pack. He made a mental note to thank Stark.

He had to thank Tony Freaking Stark for fixing him up a new pair of wings for to help the Avengers. His life had turned absolutely fucking insane, and he loved every second of it.

Time Square wasn't too far from the Tower, just far enough that all the hustle and bustle didn't intermingle with the hustle and bustle that came from Stark Tower itself, considering it was, you know, Stark Tower. Every since the drop in the weapons business, Stark Industries had had to find something to manufacture, and Tony had not disappointed. SI was the new face of tech, science, and scientific tech, not even considering how much publicity the whole Iron Man and Avengers ordeals brought to the company.

They arrived at Times Square, and Sam decided Jarvis had severely underestimated the sentient goop, because it was a lot bigger, and a lot pinker, than he'd pictured. He went to set Natasha down safely, but she was having none of that. As soon as they got close enough to the ground, she tipped over sideways, nearly tipping Sam along with her, and sommersaulted in the air twice before landing on her feet like an extra-deadly cat. Sam thought they should call her Black Panther instead of Black Widow, sometimes, but she'd only given him a vague 'it's already taken' when he'd suggested it jokingly.

Stark was already blasting the goop in a steady stream with his repulsors, and was doing close to nothing, shaving off little bits of goop, but other than that, not doing anything. Widow was sprinting towards the screaming guys in what looked like yellow beekeeper suits-Sam knew they were Advanced Idea
>Mechanics under-lackeys from the other Avenger's stories-, and they started screaming even louder when they saw her, waving their arms

around in panic and looking even more ridiculous, which Sam hadn't thought possible.<p>

He might of laughed a little bit. He wasn't really sure. His com crackled in his ear, Iron Man was flying around the pink goo like an angry hummingbird. Had it gotten bigger?

"It gets bigger with everything it eats," Iron Man answered the question Sam was sure he hadn't actually said aloud. "That's why it's going after the billboards. Apparently it thinks those are the easiest to eat. The AIM guys brought it out here and thought it was going to listen to them, but, predictably, they lost control of it after it ate _one_ car. Idiots. The organization has really gone downhill since Killian died."

"Don't sound so bummed about it," a voice taunted in his ear, and it took Sam a moment to realize that it was Hawkeye saying it. He turned in the air and Sam Steve's motorcycle heading towards them at a breakneck speed. That was faster than he thought it would be.

"Falcon, Hawkeye, you two help me with the goo. Start getting rid of whatever you can off of the main mass, it dissolves after around two minutes if the goop doesn't come in contact with it again. Widow, Cap, you wouldn't mind getting rest of the AIM guys."

"Already on it, Stark," Natasha replied, a faint note of annoyance present in her voice. Sam looked down, and saw that she'd already incapacitated around a forth of the AIM guys, though it looked like she'd used up a good bit of her gun ammunition, so it was probably good that Cap and Hawkeye had arrived. Sam took a moment more to take in the scene, including the few hundred screaming civilians still in the area, before diving down at the pink blob and changing his angle at the last minute, shearing off the very top edge of it with his right wing.

He swooped back up, and noticed that like half of the gunk had gotten stuck in his wing, between the more fragile joints, making his flying kinda stiff and jerky. It would take a while to clean out, even with the use of both hands, so he resigned himself to have to deal with it for the rest of the battle.

In the back of his mind, part of him was still screaming his head off that he was actually participating in a real live superhero/villian battle as a part of the superhero team, and that he wasn't one of the civilians of the ground, terrified. He pushed the issue back to deal with later. Right now he had some pink goop to deal with.

Hawkeye had somehow gotten up to the top of a lower billboard, though Sam hadn't been paying enough attention to him to know how. He shot an arrow and the pink goo, and it dug itself into its side. For a moment, Sam thought it would do nothing, but then a second later there was an explosion, taking an entire chunk out of the gunk's side, though it healed discouragingly quickly as the thing continued to binge itself on a half-dissolved billboard advertising what looked like some fancy perfume or something.

Sam swept in for another cut to the top of the creature, this time using his left wing. Stark's words about how the goo would dissolve in a minute or two resonated faintly in the back of his head, and he

hoped that would be true for the stuff stuck in his wing as well. He wasn't sure he wanted to re-connect the pick stuff in his wing to the main mass.

The billboard the creature was eating dissolved down to a stump just as Sam cut off another thin sheet from the top of it. As per Stark's word, the pink gunk in his right wing was mostly dissolved, though he resolved himself to wait a few more seconds until all of it was gone, just in case. His vision wandered, and he could see civilians looking up at them, pointing at all of them. Several of them were looking at him for some reason. It took him a little longer than he was proud of to realize it was because they hadn't even seen him before, and that they were probably trying to figure out who he was.

Strangely enough, the pink gunk had stilled, and was just sitting there as Iron Man slowly shaved off more and more of it with his repulsors. Hawkeye shot another arrow at it, and though it did allow itself to heal, it didn't start moving again. Sam was getting a bad feeling from that.

Another moment passed, and Sam opened his mouth to say something, although his didn't know what, but suddenly the pink mass tensed, and then half of it shot out in a tendril, completely engulfing Iron Man in pink jelly, and Sam could just tell that it was trying to dissolve his armor, eat him like it had eaten the billboards before. Iron Man made a panicked sound over the coms, and Hawkeye shouted in surprise, before lining up the explosive arrow he was going to fire at the middle of the pink mass towards the tendril that encompassed Iron Man, which was slowly drawing back towards the main mass.

Less than a second later, the arrow flex, and came in contact with the thin part between the main mass and the little part that was holding Iron Man, severing the two bits, though that did mean Stark was subjected to a sudden free fall that he didn't ask for. His limbs moved in slow motion inside of the pink jelly mass, though he did manage to move fast enough to lift his arms up and blast a hole through the top of the mass, so he could struggle free somewhat.

A moment later, Sam slammed painfully into his chest and pulled him free of the pink jelly, which slipped from his legs and kept falling towards the ground. Civilians started screaming again, but thankfully it seemed they'd all been smart enough to clear the rough area around the falling pink blob, which meant when it hit the ground it didn't squish and/or eat anybody. That was always good.

"Can you fly?" Sam asked Stark, who he was still holding, struggling to keep in the air. He heard a small grunt, both through the helmet and the coms, and there was a spluttering sound from Iron Man's boots before the repulsors light burst through the pink goop stuck to his feet, first his right foot, the left shortly following. He freed himself from Sam's arms and nodded briefly at him, conveying the thanks that wasn't said verbally.

"Well, didn't know it could do that." His voice was a little rough when he spoke. Sam noticed the mostly-gone red and gold paint on the suit, the gold-titanium alloy shining through in some points. A few of the armor's edges were even corroded down a little bit.
Yikes.

"I'm guessing we should maintain our distance, then," Hawkeye said in

his ear. The pink goo had started moving again, going for another billboard.

"Guys!" said Cap's alarmed voice, and Sam looked down for the problem. Most of the AIM agents were down, and those that weren't were quickly figuring out why everybody was at least slightly terrified of the Black Widow. But that wasn't why Cap was alarmed. It was because the pink goo atop the rooftops wasn't the only mass of pink goo that had started moving again. The small chunk that had consumed Iron Man had apparently recovered from its failure and was now attempting to absorb both people and any pink gunk that had fallen from their earlier efforts with the higher blob.

"This just got a whole lot more complicated," Cap stated, maybe a little unnecessarily, though the coms. Iron Man made a sound of agreement.

"I'll call Thor and tell him to get his ass down here," Iron Man said, "his lightning may be destructive, but I think that's what we need right now." Sam's brain registered that this actually was far from his first rodeo, unlike Sam himself. He'd only seen the big, nation-affecting news on Iron Man while living in DC, but both the familiarity in which he handled the situation and a few small memories of shaky Youtube videos told Sam that Iron Man had handled small-time supervillains in New York a lot more than the rest of them. He was probably the most experienced in this area, out of all of them.

"I'll play civilian duty until you figure out a way to destroy this thing without splitting it up again," Steve told them, running towards the lower blob while brandishing his shield. "Widow can join me once she's finished with the AIM guys. Hawkeye, you keep doing what you're doing. Falcon, you're our eyes in the sky. Tell us if there's any falling debris or anything else that could hurt civilians. Otherwise, if you feel safe about it, see if you can try and bait that the taller blob without getting too close. It seems like it prefers humans over billboards. If you don't think you can do it without getting too close, don't. Iron Man was lucky with his armor, I really don't want to see what that thing can do to human skin."

"You got it, Cap," Sam replied, and immediately surveyed the area. Due to the fact that the pink blob absorbed almost anything it could get inside of it, there wasn't much debris. They're have to be a lot more worried if, or when, it got big enough it decided buildings looked tasty, but until then they were pretty clear. He moved onto his next goal, distracting the damn thing.

Cap had told him not to try unless he felt confident that he could do it without getting too close. Sam was confidant that he couldn't do it without getting too close, but he was going to try anyway. Right now, he didn't even know if it would take his bait anyway, but if it really started gearing up for a tendril attack, he would book it. There was a difference between too close and guaranteed death, after all. He just hoped it was a significant difference.

Sam flew closer, definitely too close, and started dipping in and out of the thing's space, flapping forward or backward violently, going for sporadic, though he knew he was falling into a bit of a pattern. He could hear the civilians still screaming, and Cap shouting

instructions at them to back off, herding them away from the pink blob. This was all just a little too much, but at the same time, he felt weirdly content. It was nice, helping people again.

Hawkeye shot another arrow, and it connected with the pink blob, sending a crackle of electricity through it, but other than that, doing nothing. apparently he'd run out of explosive arrows, and was trying other things. It didn't look like it was working very well. Sam darted near again as it felt right, noticing that the pink blob was now following him as he tried to lead it across the rooftop. He didn't really know what he was supposed to do, besides hold it's attention until Thor got here and was hopefully able to do something more than take little chunks out of it. At least it wasn't eating anything anymore.

Sam realized his mistake a little too late. He'd fallen into a pattern of dips and withdrawals in his flight path, and the thing was apparently smart enough to recognize the pattern. It had been becoming gradually slower, though Sam hadn't thought any of it, until it was suddenly tensing up as he dove near again, Hawkeye was swearing in his ear, and Sam really didn't want to know what that pink goo would do with direct contact to human skin either.

He saw the tendril shoot out in slow motion, and for a brief moment, mourned his eventual reputation. Killed on his first public mission as an Avenger. And here he'd though he'd been doing so well.

He saw a flash of red and blue out of the corner of his eye, and briefly thought of Cap's shield, before the red and blue blur body-slammed him to the side with a heavy grunt, just as the pink tendril shot out right behind them. Sam gulped in air, trying to get his lungs to work after the heavy impact.

Sam tumbled back head over heels on the rooftop, the other figure, which he had determined was indeed a person, tumbling on top of him and grunting as he tried to slow their momentum. The other dude regained his footing before Sam, but didn't bother helping him up. Sam couldn't really blame him, considering the pink blob was looming towards them, and that the dude had run off to the right and was waving his arms in an effort to get it to pay more attention to him than Sam.

It took Sam another two seconds to realize the person who had body-slammed him to safety, and who he was currently watching jump and wave around in an effort to distract the blob that was, at least mostly, working, was Spiderman.

Whoa. This day just kept getting better and better, didn't it?

6. Chapter 6

Peter's day just kept getting better and better. And yes, that was sarcasm.

Well, it was nice in the beginning, he guessed. He'd woken up to food, the company of his only friend, met two new possible-friends, and then spent the nextâ€"what? One hundred fifty minutes?â€"Conversing with the three of them. Although, did it really count as conversing if he wasn't really taking a full part in the

conversation? He thought so, but maybe they didn't?

It spoke lengths about his priorities that he was thinking about a half-conversation with some maybe-friends instead of the giant pink blob currently trying to eat everything in sight, which consisted of him, and not much else. Maybe that guy he'd knocked out of the way too, but Peter obviously held most of the attention right now.

Eh, just another Tuesday, right? Peter actually didn't know whether or not it was Tuesday; in truth, it could be any other day of the week. He was fairly certain it wasn't a weekend, though. There were normally more people out on weekends, so it had to be Monday to Friday. Most likely, at least. His perception of time and dates had gone out the window after he'd become homeless.

Again, why was he thinking about this while dodging another mini-tentacle from the aforementioned gigantic pink blob? Oh, right, just another Tuesday. Last week he'd fought a group of villains that used advanced jet packs and had named themselves after pterodactyls, so no big.

Except, maybe a little big, since it looked like the entirety of the Avengers were on the scene, except for the Hulk and Thor. He hadn't had many encounters with any of them except Iron Man, but considering they had helped big-time in that alien invasion a while back, he thought well of them so far. Not to mention he used to read over Captain America comic books with Uncle Ben, and the dude was sort of Peter's childhood hero, so a team with him on it couldn't be all bad.

The thing about the Avengers, though, was that it seemed more and more like their main scene was bigger stuff, like alien invasions and Norse deities causing trouble and worldwide terrorist threats, while Spiderman just handled anything the universe deemed fit to throw at him. Like right now, where he was currently back-flipping over a pink tendrill shot at him by the pink goop.

He wasn't an idiot. He'd been observing the blob as he flipped over rooftops trying to get to the scene faster, and had watched the whole spectacle with Iron Man. The guy he'd just saved, the one with the wings, was new to him, but he hadn't really been in any position to watch the news lately, so who knew? He appreciated the guy's skill at flying, at the very least, and the fact that he was brave enough to obviously be putting in an effort to distract the blob, for whatever reason. Though, thank goodness for the dude that Peter had decided he couldn't sleep after meeting with Sam and his friends, because otherwise... yikes.

But, while observing the blob as he'd desperately parkour'd across rooftops and buildings to get to the scene, he'd noticed a few things. The Avengers seemed to be at least a little bit at a loss about this thing, as was he. But he saw that with everything it ate, it got bigger, but if tiny pieces of it were shaved off patiently, they would dissolve and that bit of mass would be lost. Though if too big a piece were shaved off could mean it'd trigger its own weird mitosis process and that would leave them with three of these things to deal with, which, let's be honest, was three and a half too many.

Peter kind of wondered what would happen if the two blobs were

reconnected. He had his theories, of course, either they would stay separate entities and cause more damage, or they would merge together once again and become a blob that was twice as big, but only half as sentient. Peter kind of wanted to herd them into the same area anyway, to minimize civilian injury and property damage, but he couldn't see of a way of doing that without dropping the blob he was currently dancing with off the building they were on, which he didn't want to do because it would give it not only a lot more food options, but would also increase the possibility of one of these things eating a civilian. He'd seen Captain America and Black Widow attempting to herd them off the scene, but he had no idea how successful they'd been or any way to check.

Right now, he just wanted Hawkeye and his winged friend to realize that he was a good enough distraction that they should really get on taking little bits off the blob again. Their best bet was to make it smaller right now, because even if they didn't find out a way to kill it, containing and managing it would be a lot easier if it wasn't the size of about twenty Peters. Maybe more. At least the blob on the ground was a little smaller, and it hadn't seemed to have realized it could do the rapid-fire tentacle thing, or the tendril of doom thing. Bonus.

Hawkeye finally caught on to what Peter was doing, thank god, because Peter wasn't in any position to tell them and if he just kept tap dancing in front of this thing without any help, eventually it would either get bored or get in a lucky shot, and he'd really prefer if neither of those happened. Unfortunately, it didn't look like Hawkeye had any of those really helpful explosive arrows that had been doing wonders. Instead, he was left with mainly taser arrows or whatever, which didn't seem to be doing much of anything. At least they were better than nothing. Fortunately, though, it looked like he'd conveyed the information to wing-dude over the communication unit or whatever, and wing-dude shearing another thin sheet of pink goop off the top was much more effective, the only downside being that he had to wait around a minute between each swing, because he wisely decided to wait until the pink goop stuck in his swinging wing was completely dissolved before going in for more.

From what Peter had seen, his best guess as to what would happen if the Wingman (yes, that's what he was calling him until he got a name. Wingman should be glad Peter was ignoring his uncomfortably obvious similarities to the Vulture) went in immediately for another sweep with the wing he'd just used, clogged up with pink gunk, would be that the pink blob would knit back together with the leftover residue in his wing and pull the wing in, probably dissolving it, along with the guys arm, if that's how it worked. Either way, it would probably be better for everybody involved if they didn't test that little theory.

Who the hell had thought it would be a good idea to let this thing loose in the most populated city in the United States? Oh right, the minions of the Creationist Hive. Couldn't forget them. At least Black Widow had handled all of them by now. Peter wasn't exactly their biggest fan after he'd confronted them for their attempts to build some sort of death rayâ€"no jokeâ€"and they'd electrocuted him with shock sticks. Repeatedly. He hadn't really liked them before then, either, but at least they'd had that dragon-age guy in charge that Iron Man had taken down, so they hadn't been totally evil and incompetent. It was like a double insult nowadays. If they were going

to be evil, they could at least be good at being evil.

Maybe Peter was thinking too far into this. He should be focusing on the sentient strawberry jello over here. Oh hello, that tendril had actually gotten kinda close. It deserved a gold star for effort, but an F minus for results.

Peter wished he could say these things out loud. At least he might bolster the spirits of the people around him, if not himself. But, no, the universe hated him and he couldn't talk. And now the smaller pink plasma buddy over here was shooting out three tentacles at once. When had this gotten unfairly harder? Jeez, at least it was a hell of a lot easier than past battles. And he had the Avengers to work with! Bright sides, right?

Peter's advanced intuition went from its natural state of, well, just being really advanced intuition, to acting as what he called his Spider Sense, and he pushed his legs out from underneath him just as a huge tendril shot right where he had been, twice the size of him and just barely missing the top of his head. He rolled out to the left as the tendril dropped a little, hoping to squish down onto him and eat him up. Thankfully his timing was right and he didn't become an overexcited jello shot's lunch.

"Nice reflexes," Wingman called out, and the voice gave Peter pause, and he just barely missed being hit by one of the small tentacles the pink goop sent his way. There was something strangely familiar about that voice, Peter knew. He might dismiss it as dÃ©jÃ vu normally, but Peter was sure he recognized it. He back-flipped and tried to get a better look at the man's face, but most of it was blocked off by a tinted visor connected to his wings that was probably there to keep both the wind and the sun out of his eyes. Practical, but not helpful for facial recognition. Especially not when the dude was moving, though he was going in for another swipe at the pink thing, so Peter couldn't really complain.

He'd figure it out later. Maybe it was just dÃ©jÃ vu, and his tired mind was over-exaggerating things. It didn't feel like it, but Peter wasn't really sure if he could trust his memory at this point.

He turned his attention from Wingman to look at the pink blob in front of them, and was happy to see that it had gotten significantly smaller without anything nearby to eat, except for the occasional shearing that hadn't dissolved quickly enough. He hoped that this would be over even quicker than he estimated, though, because he could feel his energy slowly declining, and even though he knew he had a lot more steam left, he probably wouldn't by the time this blob was done for and they still had to help deal with the other one.

Or maybe Captain America, Black Widow, and Iron Man were having better luck and were going to magically finish their blob and then come deal with this one, leaving Peter with more than enough energy to not only make a quick exit before the Avengers (or specifically another possible friend, Iron Man, whom he'd met through all their past team ups as NYC vigilante/superheroes) started asking too many questions, and to get back to the bench with minimal stops for small crime. He might even be able to fit in a nap before a mid-afternoon wander around the city, and then another before nightly patrol.

Probably not, but a spider could dream.

"Sounds like the big guy's almost here!" Hawkeye hollered at, wait... at him? Wow, they were actually bothering to keep him in the loop, at least a little. Didn't he feel special? Though, big guy? Peter kinda hoped they didn't mean the Hulk, because though there was no denying the Hulk was helpful in some situations, this definitely wasn't one of them. He supposed the Hulk's skin might not dissolve from the pink globs, but throwing these things around wouldn't do much, and punching them to pieces might just mean more weird mitosis-y effects. And the last thing they needed was more.

He was pretty sure that Tony Freaking Stark would have come to those same conclusions, though. Even if he hadn't, it wasn't like Peter could really tell them off. He could only stay silent, continue dodging pink tendrils, and hope for the best.

Only a moment later, his intuition gave a little pang; not so much that he was in danger, but that something was about to happen. The sky seemed to darken, weirdly, but before Peter could even turn his head up, the sharp scent of ozone filled the air. There was less than a second's pause before a searingly bright white line of lightning struck closer to Peter than ever before, coming from a seemingly sunny sky and aiming down to the middle of Times Square.

Peter blinked the dots out of his eyes, relying more on his intuition's instructions to dodge the incoming pink tentacle rather than his eyesight, which was kind of spotty right about now, y'know, with a photo-negative image of the lightning printed on the insides of his eyelids. He might've appreciated a little warning, since he was sure that couldn't be just a coincidence, especially not on a previously clear day.

A moment later, with an inhumanly high jump upwards, his suspicions were confirmed. He saw a black scorch mark where the lightning had struck on the pavement in Times Square, and no pink blob monster in sight. Just startled civilians. Dreams really did come true.

Peter bent over backwards and did a back-handspring to distance himself and his own pink blob monster. It had gotten a little too close for comfort while Peter was celebrating the death of its friend. Peter thought he was entitled, considering that at the moment he was actually relying pretty heavily on the Avengers, since he had no means of shaving edges off the pink blob himself, and was essentially nothing but some really enticing bait at this point.

There was a clank to the side, and Peter spared a half-second glance that was to confirm his suspicions. Yeah, most of the Avengers had just landed on the edge of the roof, or at least the two that weren't already helping him. Iron Man, Thorâ€"who was obviously the source of the lightning that had vaporized the blob, thank youâ€", Captain America, and Black Widow, whoâ€"

Wait, what? Peter did a double take, focusing on the only female member of the Avengers. Once, today in the park with Steve, was just an event. Twice, with Flappy Bird over there, was a coincidence that could be dismissed. But to quote his favorite cop shows, three times is a pattern. Had he been hit with some crazy "recognition" ray that made him project memories of people he had met before onto people

he'd never met? Because he swore there was something familiar about Black Widow. But he could also swear he'd never met her, and that paired with the recognition of Wingman's voiceâ€|. Obviously, there was something weird going on, and Peter needed toâ€"

He couldn't quite stop the strangled scream that squeezed out of his throat as he yanked his hand back from the pink tentacle that had engulfed it, watching morosely as the glove that had previously covered his hand dissolved within a second inside the pink glob monster. He stared at his hurt hand and winced when he saw what the skin looked like. He may as well have scrubbed his hands raw with a copper sponge using a bucket of boiling water that was still on a burning stove. It felt like the epidermis of his hand had been completely dissolved through in a less than a second, along with his glove. Damn, it would take a few weeks to get enough money for spandex to replace it, even if he ditched most of his time as Spidey in favor of looking pathetic on street corners and hoping somebody would throw a few coins his way.

Right, so existential crisis over possible amnesia about meeting the Avengers before could be dealt with later. Dodging the pink tentacle beast was something he needed to focus on now. Priorities.

Thankfully, it didn't seem like he'd have to focus on dodging for much longer, because Thor the Thunder God (and no, Peter was still not over that) was reeling up for another bolt of lightning, laughing about the pink thing like it was nobody's business, like it hadn't caused what had to be thousands of dollars in property damage just by eating billboards, and could have done a lot worse. Come to think of it, he was acting a lot like Peter did before all had been said and done with the heart attack fiasco. Some sort of coping mechanism, right? He just never thought the god of hair care products would be somebody Peter could relate to.

Or maybe Peter's mind was just warping things out of proportion again. Who knew?

The scent of ozone filled the air again, and Peter flipped back to a safe distance in seconds. Maybe he relished the opportunity to show all these 'professionals' that he wasn't an amateur who regularly got hit, like the tentacle beast had just gotten him. Maybe he hadn't endured years of martial arts training or whatever, but he had gone more than three years out on the streets of New York, fighting everything from angry space symbiotes who only wanted him for his body, to your regular criminal thug, to a very literal cat burglar who wore a costume way too tight to actually be practical. Then again, look who's talking.

Peter turned his head, covered his ears, and shut his eyes just as a terrifyingly bright light came down from the previously sunny sky, and Peter heard the sound of impossibly loud thunder, along with a faint squishing noise that he assumed was the pink blob being vaporized by a hundred thousand mega-volts of pure electricity. _Yikes_. He was glad Thor was on their side.

His ears were still ringing when he removed his hands, and the imprint of the two lightning bolts would probably be burned onto the back of his eyelids for a while. His peripheral senses didn't cut out completely, though, and he could tell Wingman was landing behind him

a few meters away, and Black Widow, Thor, and Captain America were walking towards him. Hawkeye had disappeared from his perch across the way, probably going down to the ground so he could come around and regroup with his teammates, and Iron Man was approaching Peter himself.

This was about the time he would have webbed away, if he still had webbing. Of course, if he still had his webs, he'd probably still have his voice, which meant he probably wouldn't be running away from someone who he'd once considered, at the very least, a reliable ally. Iron Man, Tony Stark, whatever you wanted to call him, was a lot of things, but an enemy to Peter he was not.

"Hey kid, I wanna talk," he called after Peter, who'd turned to see if there was enough space on any side to gain enough momentum to get to the next building over. Unfortunately, the only side that could possibly work was the one where four of the six present Avengers had collected to talk about after-battle stuff, and Peter wasn't willing to bet that they wouldn't respond fast enough to grab him.
Damn.

Normally, or as normal as could get for somebody who regularly dressed up in blue and red spandex and fought burglars in his free time, he'd jump at the chance to talk to the approaching tech genius. Not only was he one of Peter's personal role models, but they'd worked together before with minor super-villain mischief in New York, and they'd talked enough after the battles that Peter might've considered Tony a friend, if it was anyone other than Tony Freaking Stark. He'd even bought him food once or twice after battles, and even after the breakfast this morning, Peter would absolutely never turn down any free food. Not even that weird-tasting shawarma stuff the guy liked too much.

Except there was that sentence, "I wanna talk", and Peter needed an escape route. Because he absolutely could not hang around long enough for Iron Man to ask why he hadn't been his usual quipping self during the battle. Not only would he not be able to answer, but... this was Tony Stark. He just couldn't.

"Don't look so skittish, kid," Iron Man said, right beside him. Peter hadn't been tracking his progress nearly as well as he should have while he'd been searching for an escape route. He was feeling that weird dizzy vertigo sensation he had when was operating on too little sleep. He needed to get somewhere safe and hidden to redress before a quick nap. This 'conversation' was the exact opposite of both what he wanted, and what he needed.

"Seriously," Iron Man directed. Peter tried to relax his body language, but that was easier said than done when he was strung tighter than Hawkeye's bowstring. He felt like their were more eyes on them then there were, or maybe... he peered over Iron Man's shoulder and lo and behold the other Avengers were all watching them with anything but subtle interest. Great, and now they had an audience for this too.

Peter turned his attention back to Stark, ignoring his pounding heartbeat in his ears. He was pretty sure that wasn't even from the battle, just his nervousness. God, it's like when he talked to Gwen for the first time-

That trail of thought certainly wasn't helping anything!

A big red and gold hand came up and waved in front of his face, the repulsor emitter dark, but, you know, _right in front of his face._ Peter snapped back to attention and tried to look like he hadn't almost crushed Iron Man's gauntlet, and therefore his forearm, between his hands. It wasn't his fault he got twitchy when he was tired! Yeesh.

"Hey kid, you listening to me?" Iron Man asked, shifting his posture a little bit.

No.

Peter nodded.

"Well, okay," Iron Man sighed a little, and Peter wanted to wince. "I just wanted to ask if you were okay. Are you?"

Peter stared at him. This wasn't even a side effect of his muteness that he didn't know how to answer without words, and was therefore silent. The right answer would be a thumbs up, and the correct answer would be shaking his head and making a vague shrugging motion when asked to elaborate. He was literally just surprised. Had Iron Man just asked him if he was _okay?_ Weird.

Peter took his left hand, the one that the pink tentacle beast hadn't tried to eat, and gave a thumbs up. Iron Man's mask didn't convey any emotions, but behind him, the Black Widow sure looked skeptical. Darn super-spies.

"Sorry if I'm being intrusive," Iron Man said, and wow, maybe he did actually sound a little sheepish? It was probably Peter's tired mind exaggerating more than anything. Why would _he_ care?

Iron Man seemed to be eyeing him like a wounded animal he was trying to corner to he could fix his broken wing or whatever. Wounded spider, broken web-shooters. Heh. Why was that so funny?

Peter shifted his balance again to keep himself from falling over. He wasn't sure how obvious it was that he was dirt tired, but he was sure the super-spy over there had probably picked up on him swaying like a sapling by now. He was always tired, these days, and he hadn't been very good at managing his sleep schedule before all this, so he wasn't even surprised when he discovered he couldn't even count how many times he had exhaustively landed on a roof top and his legs had gone out from under him and he'd just taken a quick nap there. At least ten. It was dangerous to sleep in his Spider costume because if he didn't wake up in time they might be able to get his mask off, and there went everything he'd worked so hard for.

What had Iron Man just said? He blinked, wanting to shake his head to shake himself awake but knowing the gesture might set something off. Was that an expectant look from Iron Man, or was he just projecting onto the blank face plate?

The face plate popped open, as if it had been reading his mind, to reveal the face of Tony Stark, who was very _definitely_ giving him an expectant look. He'd obviously missed something in his endeavor to not fall over and immediately pass out. Today's early morning light

rain hadn't been the nicest weather to try and catch some Z's during. Better than snow, but not by much.

"I said," Stark began, and Peter might have sighed in relief a little bit. He was going to repeat himself. "That I was wondering if you wanted to come back to the Tower to get that patched up." He waved down at Peter's injured hand, maybe a little dismissively.

Peter froze, genuinely contemplating the question. He'd have to say no, of course, but if situations were different (and by different he meant like before) than would he have said yes? If situations were different would the offer even be extended to him, or was this just pity?

"When did Stark become friends with Spiderman?" Peter turned to look behind him, focusing in on a figure that had just swung their body over the side of the rooftop like no problem. Hawkeye, the only person that had been missing from their little battle after-party. As he approached, Peter saw a better alternative than trying to answer the question. Escape.

Apparently Stark saw it too, or he just knew Peter's body language better than Peter thought he did, because he lunged for Peter's arm just as the younger superhero took off in a sprint. If he hadn't been wearing the Iron Man suit, he would have caught him. But, as his limbs were a little too weighed down, Peter was home free by a couple of millimeters, sprinting for the edge of the building straight towards Hawkeye, who looked alarmed.

Peter tensed his muscles as he ran towards the archer, who was just starting to react to Peter's apparent assault, but that's not what Peter needed him for. The archer crouched down just as Peter leapt up, planting a hand on either shoulder and somersaulting over the archer's head, planting his feet firmly on Hawkeye's shoulder blades and using them as a springboard for the momentum he needed to latch onto the side of the next building.

He'd used tricks like that before, but normally it was on evil scientists or guards, not a very surprised Avenger who could count as an ally on a good day. They'd never met face to face, but considering that they'd just fought a weird pink blob together, no questions asked, Peter was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Besides, he'd just used the guy like a gymnastic springboard, so...

Peter vaulted off the side of the building he was stuck to and flipped horizontally before catching on the side of the building, scuttling diagonally so he headed for the roof the same time as he continued to move forward. He'd left his stuff back at the park, in the dense hedges, but he'd need at least his jeans before he tucked himself away somewhere for a nap, and the bench was always a perfect candidate. And definitely not just because Sam knew where it was.

Nope. Not in the slightest.

7. Chapter 7

As soon as they got back to the Tower, they took off their various

gear and wandered to the Avengers Rec floor, like they all magically knew that an important conversation was going to go down there. Maybe this was an after-battle ritual of some sort, and Sam, as the new guy, was left out of the loop. He didn't know, but most of the Avengers were dressed in comfortable, ratty clothes and lounged on various pieces of furniture, along with Darcy, Jane, and Pepper, by the time that Sam stepped out of the elevator, dressed in comfortable clothes of his own.

Everybody simultaneously swiveled to face him when the elevator dinged, which was a bit unsettling, but Sam ignored it in favor for carefully winding his way through various Avengers to take a seat next to Cap. Stark was the only person standing, idly playing with images woven out of holograms that looked like they were various newspaper articles about Spiderman. All mostly recent, judging from the headline text exclaiming various lines about the loss of his webs and voice.

"So what was up with that?" Hawkeye asked, a few feet away from him, soon as Sam had settled down. He seemed to be looking in Stark's direction, which made since, because it seemed like he was the only person who knew what was going on. Sam had picked up the basic details from the bits and pieces of conversation they'd overheard, but he was pretty confused.

"We're friends," Stark said, shrugging casually, as if it were nothing.

"You're friends," Darcy repeated in an incredulous tone, so somebody must have already told her and Jane what they'd congregated to speak about. "With freakin' Spiderman."

"Don't say that like it's crazy," Stark complained, flicking the holograms to the side so a new set came up, also displaying newspaper pages, this time with headlines like "Spiderman and Iron Man team up" or "Spidey and Iron Man take down Rhino!". Sam saw one in the corner, from the Daily Bugle, proudly proclaiming that Iron Man and Spiderman had faced off against each other. It featured a picture of Stark helping Spiderman to his feet, which seemed to somewhat discredit the title's claim.

"Oh," somebody said, though Sam wasn't sure who. Maybe it was himself.

"Oh," Stark repeated in a snarky tone. "Not so crazy, huh? Before I became a consultant to SHIELD, Iron Man technically counted as a vigilante, though I didn't go through anything near as crazy as Spides did. It was both because my fame made it impossible for the police to go as batshit crazy as they did with him and because I crossed over state and country borders, meaning I wasn't a localized violation. Which meant more than one group was looking at my case, so foul play was almost impossible. Whereas with Spidey, there were so many dirty cops in the mix you could plant a garden. After Daredevil took down the Kingpin nearly half the people who were working on the Spiderman case went into hiding."

Sam could see Steve's fists clenching, along with several other Avengers, who showed various signs of discomfort and anger. Nobody really liked considering the possibility of dirty cops, but especially with the Kingpin ordeal, since the man had had nearly a

quarter of New York's best and brightest on his side, and /nobody had noticed/.

It was especially disconcerting for Sam to consider how much sway the Kingpin might have had in Spiderman's terrible reputation if around half of the officers working on capturing him had been the Kingpin's men. He knew the police's opinion influenced the press greatly, which influenced the police force back again, so a couple of well-timed words from a few of the Kingpin's men could have driven the whole thing.

Thank god for Daredevil, then. Or maybe just red-suited vigilantes in general.

"Why'd you team up with him so many times?" Jane asked, waving a hand at the displayed holograms.

Stark tilted his head slightly, raising an eyebrow a little. "We never really 'teamed up' like the press seems to think, planned and all. Even living in Malibu, like before, one of SI's main business centers is in New York. The very building you're all sitting in right now, actually, which meant I spent a lot of time in New York myself. If a super villain attacked when I was in range, I would go after it, and I inevitably ran into Spiderman a lot of times. There's only so many times you can fight a supervillain with somebody until you bond." Stark flicked a few articles aside and enlarged one with a picture of him and Spiderman eating what looked like pizza on the top of a rooftop, Stark with the faceplate flipped up, Spiderman with his mask pulled up to his nose. They looked like they were both in the middle of laughing.

Sam guessed he could relate. He'd made friends with Cap and Widow the same way, only with a lot less meetings and time. Fighting super villains together was one of the world's greatest friend-making processes—though, admittedly, it was also one of the world's weirdest.

"If you two are friends, why'd he get out of there as soon as he got the opportunity?" Hawkeye asked, fiddling with his phone. He briefly glanced up, shooting Stark an annoyed look. "That opportunity being _me_. Thanks for the warning about that, by the way."

"You're welcome," Stark replied with a smug smirk on his face. It faltered after a short pause, though, and Sam was about to ask why when he added, "As for why he ran, it's unclear. Could be for any number of reasons. He might not be an Avengers fan, he might be _too big_ of an Avengers fan, maybe he knew more about the pink stuff than we did." Stark flicked his wrist so the more recent headlines about Spiderman came up again. "The most likely reason, is, of course, that it has something to do with," he gestured to the holograms displayed in front of him, "this."

He exhaled forcefully, a frustrated expression flickering across his face. "That puts me on the same page as every press outlet across the state of New York." He clenched his fists, "We're all trying to figure out whatever caused Spidey to go silent."

"You'll figure it out," Pepper reassured, standing up and dusting off her skirt. "I only came up to make sure you were all okay and nobody needed to be dragged to medical." She looked directly at Stark. "Call

me if you need anything, okay?" He caught her eye for a moment, and then gave a small nod, letting a little of the stress drain out of his shoulders before turning back to the display.

"Have you checked any of the other side effects?" Natasha spoke up a moment after Pepper had descended down the elevator, leaning forward a little as her eyes flicked analytically over the hologram articles. "People are noticing the voice and webs because they're the most prominent, but there have to be other changes."

Stark looked momentarily surprised, glancing back at them like he was shocked they were helping, but after a second or two he shrugged to himself and turned back around. "His reaction times are slower, it takes him longer to get up, and if I'm right, his strength has decreased slightly..."

"Apparently so has his social tact," Hawkeye grumbled, and then made a face when everybody looked at him. "I'm sorry if I don't appreciate the kid using me as a springboard."

"So you don't like Spider-themed superheroes using you as lift support?" Natasha asked in a seemingly off-handed manner. "I'll keep that in mind."

Sam had to press his lips together to keep from laughing, but even then he was pretty sure a little squeak slipped out. Thankfully, it was overshadowed by Thor tipping his head back and letting off a booming laugh that befitted the name "God of Thunder" quite well. Sam was a little intimidated.

After a moment, Stark whistled slightly. "O-kay, awkward super spy flirting aside..." Hawkeye threw a shoe at the back of his head, and Stark wasn't quite fast enough to dodge it. "You can all leave, now."

Sam kinda felt disappointed, in an odd way. He knew he was the odd one out in the group at the moment. He was just barely getting a grasp on their dynamics, though he knew they were still settling in with each other, too. Partially, he knew that this would be a great opportunity to get to know all the other Avengers and maybe grow a little closer to somebody besides Cap and Widow. But mostly, he was disappointed because he was genuinely curious about the whole Spiderman issue. Though, that wasn't exactly unique; everybody was interested in the Spiderman issue, even outside of Avengers Tower.

"Do you want us to leave?" Bruce asked, drawing Sam's attention back into the active conversation, or more accurately, everybody staring at either Bruce or Tony, including Bruce and Tony, who were staring at each other with almost frightening intensity. Sam thought the older genius might ask what he meant, but the meaning hadn't been lost on anybody.

"If you want, you can go," Stark replied, shrugging in what was supposed to be a casual manner. If it wasn't for the atmosphereâ€"the way Bruce's eyes narrowed and Jane and Darcy shiftedâ€"Sam would have been fooled, like times before. But there was something different this time aroundâ€|.

Tony went back to sifting through the blue holographic newspapers.

Nobody stood.

* * *

><p>Peter had to take a break on a rooftop halfway between Times Square and the park. Breathing hard, he blinked spots out of his vision. He hadn't even been going that fast, but between the scrape on his leg from last night, the fact that it was really hard to scale walls with a hand that had been stripped of most of its skin, and sleep deprivation? Not easy. He'd hardly slept last night, or the night before, or even the night before that night, and he was really starting to regret it right now.

He forced himself to swing his legs over the edge of the building and stay in a sitting position, even though he really wanted to lay down and take one of those little rooftop naps that he wasn't supposed to. Sleeping in his costume meant just any normal, ordinary citizen could walk up and find out who he was, if they were quick enough, and that wouldn't be good for anybody involved, but most especially him.

His hand hurt. His leg hurt. His entire body hurt, actually, partially because he'd body slammed the Wingman out of the way from that pink tentacle, partially just because of strain. He wasn't getting enough sleep. He knew he wasn't getting enough sleep, because he woke up too frequently sleeping in cold or rainy weather, and he always pushed the edges of his patrols as Spiderman, even though his entire day was practically Spiderman now that he'd done away with silly little distractions like school and family andâ€"

A sound hitched in the back of his throat; something between a sob and a hysterical giggle. Peter tilted his head back, trying to soak in as much sunlight as possible through the costume. He remembered doing almost this exact same thing just a little while ago, in another life. Working on homework or more interesting things with half his body dangled over the edge of the roof, but eventually Aunt May would come out and scold him because she didn't know that he wouldn't fall off unless he wanted to.

Aunt May. Possibly the only family he had left, and he'd abandoned her. He didn't want to, he really didn't want to, but even if she could understand why he'd had to run away from the Millers, their neighbors certainly wouldn't. If he showed up anywhere near Forest Hills, Queens, CPS would be on him within ten minutes, even solely based on his homeless-looking appearance. Most of his past neighbors were great people, but that was only a disadvantage in this situation. They were exactly the people that would care enough to call CPS if they saw a homeless teenager. If CPS grabbed him up again, it would only break his Aunt's heart more to hear that he'd run again, if he even managed to get that far.

No. It was much easier like this; he even almost preferred it. He didn't have to lie to her face every day, didn't have to explain away her worries with gradually less believable stories. He didn't have to depend on anyone.

And what would he do after his eighteenth birthday? He couldn't see himself just straight up telling her, but either the truth came out, or the lies would tear their relationship apart. Besides, he'd be stupid to think anything would go back to normal after this. Heck,

'normal' got thrown out the window as soon as Uncle Ben died, or after that, Gwen.

Everybody around him, everybody who helped him, got hurt. Or worse. He should be glad Aunt May was still alive after her heart attack. He should just leave her alone, before he did something worse, and she died, just like Gwen or Captain Stacy. This was an opportunity for a fresh start, of sorts. He could stay away from people. He could do things right this time. The fact that he couldn't speak really only helped his case.

But Sam...goddammit. Why couldn't everybody just leave Peter alone? It was safer for them, in the long shot. Sam and his friends were just going to end up getting hurt.

"You done with your pity party yet?" he whispered angrily to himself, lifting his head a little to gaze out at the city skyline. Judging by the position of the sun, it seemed like it was fairly early in the afternoon. One o'clockâ€"or something closeâ€"from his judgement, and the city was full and bustling under him, but not overly crowded. Yep, definitely not a weekend day today.

Peter shook his head violently as he felt his eyes drifting closed. No costumed naps, but definitely no costumed naps while sitting on the edge of a towering building. He pulled his leg up to the side of the building, shifting his weight back to be careful of the leg scrape he'd gotten last night. What he failed to account for, however, was the very new injury of his hand, and he let out a pain mewl when an angry throb shot up from his hand. The sting had only just died down from using it to climb building walls to get this far, which only promised more pain for the rest of the journey.

Peter investigated the wound a little more thoroughly than he'd had time for earlier. He didn't see any blood, which was good. It actually looked fairly normal, just a few shades pinker than his normal skin tone, like he'd gotten a mild sunburn. Barely even noticeable without close scrutiny. What it looked like didn't at all betray the pain that came from simply touching it against something. Hopefully whatever that pink glop had been made of, it wasn't poisonous to humans. Or spiders, for that matter.

He clenched his injured hand into a fist, pushing the painful twangs that came from the motion into the back of his mind. Fighting was going to be pretty hard for a while if it hurt every time he even made a fist with this hand, much less punched somebody with it. And it was his right hand, too. He'd become a lot more ambidextrous even since the spider bite, especially since if you only used one side of your body while fighting you were putting yourself at a terrible disadvantage, even against normal enemies. Still, he tended to wield small objects better in his right hand, like a pencil, which he didn't use anymore, or a sewing needle, which he used a considerably more, especially after becoming homeless.

Peter attempted to get to his feet again, this time minding both the minor leg injury and the maybe-not-so-minor hand injury. Once he was standing, he took one more long look down at the Manhattan skyline, basking in the glow of afternoon February sunshine, before turning around and sprinting towards the edge of the building and leaping off the edge.

His hand stung on impact with the side of the next building over, but that was nothing unexpected.

8. Chapter 8

Roughly two and a half days after it had gotten glomped by wannabe strawberry jello, Peter had determined that his hand wasn't going to actively try and kill him, or even inactively try to kill him. No poison, no anti-healing, no magic. Just a giant pink glob of jelly that dissolved everything it touched, including the skin of his hand. God, Peter wished that was a sentence that sounded weird to him at this point.

His hand had healed remarkably well, considering how well his injuries had been doing otherwise the past few months. That only helped prove Peter's hypothesis that his healing factor heavily relied on his metabolism, which was why his healing factor was all wonky nowadays. Useful information, but there wasn't much Peter could do with it.

His leg scrape had even healed up pretty nicely, leaving Peter's hand the only injury to really worry over. He'd checked it over every so often, but it didn't seem like it was going to be anything to gnash teeth over. It still hurt to touch things with, but Peter was pretty accustomed to pain at this point, so as long as he didn't get it scraped up again he should be fine in a week or so, since the magic healing-advancing powers of food seemed to be coming to the end of their rope, even though Peter'd managed to snag a pity hot dog off one of the nicer cart peddlers at the end of his day yesterday.

Right now, though, he had other survival problems besides food. Sleep. Peter knew he wasn't the best at managing his sleep schedule, in any stage of his life. First it was video games, and then science experiments, and just one more article on Wikipedia, and then it was Spiderman, and now he had nobody to come in and tell him to sleep, which made him even worse at deciding when it was time to quit.

Right now, judging by the lack of pedestrian traffic and the position of the sun, Peter would say it was just shy of seven in the morning, which meant he'd been up all night. Again. The last time he'd slept was last afternoon, and he hadn't bothered to even step back into his civilian clothes until about fifteen minutes ago. To be fair, he'd been haunting a pretty busy neighborhood, in terms of crime, and it had just been one rescue after another, until he'd gotten close enough the park that he'd decided to forego sleeping in some dirty, gross alleyway in favor of trudging the remaining mile or so to the bench before passing out.

He was practically a dead man walking at this point, or more accurately, stumbling. The park was only a few blocks away from where he was now, and he knew the neighborhood well enough by now that he was confident he'd make it to the bench easily, even as tired as he was.

Of course, this was about the time Peter tripped over a crack in the sidewalk, and barely managed to regain his balance before falling on his face. He stopped walking for a moment, inhaling deeply and

focusing. It didn't did much to wake him up, but it did a little. He shook his head from side to side and shoved his hands further in his pockets, fighting a yawn while continuing on his way.

The next few blocks passed without excitement, but Peter wasn't expecting anything different. He kept his eyes downcast at the pavement as he walked, partially an attempt to not almost trip again, partially because he was too tired to keep his head up. He wasn't watching where he was walking, so he shouldn't have been surprised when he bumped into somebody. Peter hunched his shoulders a little as he shuffled aside, folding his body into itself as he maneuvered around the guy he'd bumped into. Times before, his body language had been enough to convince whoever he'd bumped into that it wasn't worth the effort to lecture him for not apologizing aloud, and they'd go on their way.

A large hand caught his arm, and just then it occurred to him how weird it was running into somebody on a normally abandoned path this early in the morning. "Peter?" a voice asked, and he looked up and blinked a couple times to fight the sleepiness.

Sam was there. Like right there, in front of him. It wasn't Sam's hand on his arm, though. That belonged to his blond friend. His name started with an S, Peter couldn't be bothered to strive for any more detail than that. The redhead was also there, past Sam's shoulder. She was frowning at him, but it wasn't an angry frown, more like a curious frown, so Peter didn't worry.

Something made a crinkling sound, and Peter swiveled his head a little. Sam held up a white paper bag that meant he'd brought Peter food. Yay. Peter bit down on the inside of his mouth so hard he almost tasted blood, but it woke him up, just a little bit. Enough that he could lift his head a little further and open his eyes just enough so that it didn't look like he was going to topple over right then and there.

He straightened his spine a little. Sam was talking, but Peter hadn't been paying attention. He still wasn't paying attention. Huh.

He forced himself to tune in, just as Sam finished talking. Peter was pretty sure he'd heard the word "worried" in there somewhere, but maybe not. Now they were moving the rest of the way up the hill, and Peter had to put in extra effort to not look down at his feet while walking, even though he kinda felt like he might trip. The redheaded lady was giving him a weird look, but Peter wasn't nearly awake enough to care.

At the top of the hill, he all but collapsed onto the bench, forcing his body to stay upright. Sam sat next to him just as he realized he really didn't have the energy to keep shifting his weight to keep him at the top of the slanted bench, instead of sliding down into Sam.

The redheaded lady sat down on the other side of Sam, and Sam waved something in his face. Peter blinked a few times before realizing he was supposed to take whatever it was. He reached up and fumbled a little before managing to grab it, startling at how warm it was before realizing that what Sam had just handed him was probably food. It was mostly circular, and going by the smell it was probably a McDonald's burger.

Exactly one bite in he realized that barely-aware Peter would not be able to mask his relatively newfound contempt for bacon as well as normal Peter could. He supposed it was too much to ask that nobody in the group notice.

After a few bites, where he concentrated his best efforts on trying not to choke, Sam gently nudged his shoulder, Peter swallowed painfully, because he hadn't chewed the burger as well as he should of, focusing all his attention available—which wasn't very much—on listening to Sam.

"—you okay?" he was asking, giving Peter a concerned look. "You're making weird faces."

It took Peter way too long by anyone's standards to process what Sam had just said. He inhaled deeply, trying to get a little more oxygen flow to wake him up and nodded at Sam. He was pretty sure nobody in their little group believed him.

Eventually, just like the last time, a small conversation started up while they were eating. Peter was a little too tired to even bother to try and pay attention, but the noise in the background was really relaxing. Maybe a little too relaxing.

Peter fell asleep on Sam's shoulder.

Well, not really "fell asleep". Peter slowly started falling asleep, but then his brain would remind his body that falling asleep while there was food in your mouth was a choking hazard, and he would startle himself awake just enough to rinse and repeat three minutes later.

He was in the middle of one of these cycles when a hand shook his shoulder, and he perked up again, making a valiant effort to look like he hadn't just been called asleep. He swallowed the bite of food in his mouth, gulping a little painfully, and reluctantly looked at Sam, the one who'd shaken him.

The first reason that came into Peter's mind for this didn't wait long enough for a second thought before rushing out his mouth. "Am I crushing you?" he asked, and scooted up the bench. Or, at least he tried. His mouth had forgotten that he didn't talk anymore so he just kinda mouthed at Sam and moved about half an inch up the bench before sliding right back down.

"We can leave, if you want," Sam offered nicely, after a moment or two to process Peter's weird actions. "It's pretty obvious you're tired. Don't feel like you need to force yourself to stay awake just because we're here."

So. Goddamn. Nice. The world truly did not deserve him. Peter didn't deserve him. Jesus, it was heartbreaking. Peter wanted to hug him. He refrained, but the urge was there.

Sam beat him to the punch, though it was a one-shouldered hug from the side. "Don't look so shocked," Sam teased in the nicest tone of voice ever, and then moved to get up. Peter didn't quite manage to stop his grabby-hand motion before Sam noticed it.

For a moment, he was frozen. Petrified of Sam's reaction to his sudden clinginess, and Peter wanted to sink into the ground. But then his friend started to smile, and it was one of those smiles that stopped wars, and Peter felt like he'd just drunk liquid sunshine.

Sam sat back down next to him as Peter neatly folded up the rest of his burger and set it back in the bag Sam had brought. He hadn't been able to sleep near anyone ever since Aunt May's heart attack. It was one of the things that had made the Millers so mad at him all the time, since they'd doubled up their foster kids in almost everything, including bedrooms. Was it weird that he was kind of excited?

He'd nearly forgotten about Sam's friends and was softly reminded when his McDonald's bag was taken from out of the way by the muscular blonde dude on the ground. S- something. Sam 2.

The redhead lady, or Sam 3, if Peter was rolling with his theme, got up off the bench so Peter would have more space to lie down. Peter could have sworn she winked at him, but then again, he was really tired. He could have imagined it.

They left quietly, so subtly Peter barely noticed it. Sam had somehow maneuvered them so Peter was on the other side of the bench, and his head was cradled in Sam's lap. Peter felt the slightest urge to fight it, instincts from years of superhero-ism, but he was comfortable. And tired. And, gosh, this kinda felt like a final friend test. If he could fall asleep around Sam, he didn't know...he felt like it might seal something. Add a little more normality to his horribly unusual life.

Peter was obviously becoming a sap. Wasn't he supposed to be a super tough, menacing vigilante, terrifying New Yorker's left and right by saving their lives, and their pocket change. Where was that Peter?

His breathing evened out, and Peter decided he didn't really care. He was going to go to sleep right now, and think of all the little details when his brain didn't feel like Aunt May had taken a potato masher to it.

And so he did.

9. Chapter 9

Tony was too proud to admit it, but on the issue of Spiderman, he was stuck.

He was nowhere near an answer, even though he was closer than he'd been yesterday. Unfortunately, it was going to take a lot more than rifling through the scraps of various news outlets and collecting information to understand whatever was up with his favorite arachnid-themed superhero. He made a little reminder to the side to thank the other arachnid-themed superhero he knew for the tip about looking for other side effects of the change in Spiderman, though. It had given him few extra clues to this whole debacle, and every little bit counted.

The list he was currently in the process of making was about those

side effects, every possible one he could find, from sudden weight loss, to the faltering super strength, to the strange change in the web pattern of the suit. He would store a copy of it in his Spider2 file when he was done. "Spider2" because just "Spider" was already taken by a certain red-haired super spy. He would have stored it in the file called "Second Greatest Superhero Vigilante in New York", but he wasn't entirely sure this guy was one and the same with the Spiderman New York had slowly and painfully grown to love.

The theory, at first glance, seemed a little ridiculous, but Tony had a whole list of reasons why they might be different people. He himself didn't really buy into the theory, but if he was going to solve whatever was going on with his little buggy friend, considering every possibility seemed like the logical thing to do. Plus, his impostor theory was at least a bit more plausible than most of the other theories flying around out there.

Hey, New York's personal superhero had something wrong with him. People were panicking trying to figure out how to fix it. Including Tony.

Tony didn't really want the impostor theory to be true, though. He did always enjoy being right, but in this particular instance it might not be so nice. Partially because almost all of New York would probably get really angry if somebody was impersonating the Spiderman they were all fond of, but mostly... Tony had become kind of fond of the guy too, okay? Spiderman wasâ€"or had beenâ€"his friend, and Tony wasn't exactly generous when it came to genuine friendship. There were currently only three people he counted as his friends: Bruce, Rhodey, Pepper, and possibly Spiderman, if nothing had changed between them. Though after the scene of the rooftop and Spiderman literally taking the first available escape route away from him, that was looking a lot less likely.

Their friendship was slightly more than he'd told the Avengers after the close encounter with Spidey, though he'd given them all the basics. They were friends, yes, and they'd definitely bonded over protecting the sometimes-hateful-sometimes-grateful citizens of the fair city of New York. However, it was a little more than that, at least to Tony.

* * *

><p>Their first meeting had been just in the very beginning stages of when he'd begun to realize he was dying of palladium poisoning, but was still very firmly swimming in denial. He'd been in New York to work on planning for the Expo when a supervillain had attacked, some guy the news called 'the Rhino', probably because the exoskeleton he was wearing resembled the animal right down to the horn. He'd later discover that this guy was one of Spidey's regulars, but at that moment he was unaware.</p>

Tony had blasted away from an irate Pepper as soon as he saw the news, and had confronted the guy for about two minutes before the then-infamous super-vigilante had shown up, announcing his presence by calling down, "A jewelry store? Do they even sell rings big enough for your fingers, O'Hirn?"

O'Hirn, or Rhino to the general public, had assumed a terrifyingly angry face and growled out, "_You!_", in the most hateful tone Tony

had ever heard, before proceeding to try and smash Spiderman with the glass counter he'd pried up from the ground, completely ignoring Tony.

"Did you break out of prison just to see lil' old me?" Spiderman taunted, dodging the swat of the cabinet before shooting a web at it and pulling it away from Rhino's grasp. "I'm touched." He flipped up off the wall at a surprising speed and kicked Rhino in the face, also completely ignoring Tony.

Tony, as almost everyone in the world knew at this point, did not take well to being ignored. And, considering he'd been the one preoccupying Rhino for the past two minutes before the vigilante had swung in, he was a little offended that neither had bothered with him after Spiderman had shown up.

He rerouted 46% power to his right repulsor and blasted Rhino back into a wall right as he was about to barrel into Spiderman. He also mentally high-fived himself at how well that had worked.

Spiderman stopped in his tracks and paused for a moment, before looking over his shoulder at Tony. Even under the mask, Tony could see his jaw drop in obvious surprise, before he said, "You're Tony Stark."

Tony basked in the awe in his voice, feeling inanely proud of the fact that New York's most famous vigilante recognized him on sight. Well, of course he did, but the blatant hero worship in his voice was a good boost to Tony's ego. "Yup," he confirmed.

Spiderman stared at him for a little while longer before his body language began to show a little confusion, and he made a gesture-y hand motion at Tony. "Why-?" He began to ask, but was cut off when a giant gray hand came from behind him and swatted him into the wall.

Spiderman groaned while Tony took to flight, lighting up the repulsors in his gauntlets and aiming them at Rhino. The supervillain didn't seem very intimidated and bowled towards Tony like a freight train. Tony realized a little too late that that particular simile was all too true as Rhino slammed into him, horn first, immediately damaging the armor. The impact sent him flying like a rag doll into the jewelry store wall.

He groaned in pain and watched as one of Rhino's large hands lifted, clenched into a fist to come back down and smash him. If he died like this, Pepper would bring him back to life just to kill him again. Probably with her stilettos.

Rhino's fist came down again and the armor crumpled under the hit, though Tony was happy to see it held up a little better than he'd thought it would. Rhino raised his fists again and again, before pausing a moment for a kill strike, evidently fixated on taking out Tony before he got back to beating up Spiderman.

Tony's thoughts turned into a jumbled, panicked mess. He tried thinking his way out of it but the four hits from the strong metal exoskeleton had done some damage, and even if he somehow miraculously survived this next hit, the one after that would definitely do him in. Tony really didn't favor the idea of dying.

There was a _thwip!_ sound from off to his right, and just as the giant fist was about to crush him, he was jerked roughly to the side, temporarily out of harm's way.

He was lifted to his feet by a grunting Spiderman, who had webbed him out of the way just moments earlier. Tony couldn't see his mouth, but he knew that Spiderman was giving him a shaky smile.

"Thanks for the help, Mr. Stark," the red and blue suited vigilante began. "I really appreciate it, honestly! But maybe you wanna sit the rest of this one out? I'll distract Rhino until he steams himself out enough that I can web him up."

Tony had never really had many "lightbulb moments", as he called them. His thought process was a long, winding road, very rarely did he register something all at once. Right now, though, as he watched someâ€"some _kid_, really. Spiderman couldn't be much more than half Tony's ageâ€"charge a maniac criminal who could very easily kill him, he had what could only be described as one of his very rare lightbulb moments.

Tony, unlike a lot of people seemed to think, knew how to handle a gun even before the Iron Man armor. He even knew basic martial arts. You make weapons, you have to understand how they work, and if you're a Stark, you have to know how to protect yourself. He was fully capable of keeping himself safe.

This was far beyond simple martial arts, though, and his life wasn't the only one in danger here. He could see pedestrians and police officers just outside, people that the giant gray idiot would probably crush in search for more objects value. If Spiderman hadn't swung in, Tony'd probably be toast right now, along with a lot of the pedestrians outside.

Tony was sent back to his last lightbulb moment, which had occurred while escaping the custody of the Ten Rings, when his friend and companion Yinsen was dying in his arms. _Don't waste your life_, indeed. Tony had taken heart to those words, had started putting a little consideration into what his lifestyle did to other people, and had started trying to fix it.

This lightbulb moment was a little different. For one, he'd come up with the lesson all on his own, and he barely knew the guy who'd made him register it. _Was that enough?_ To a lot of people, it would be. Tony was taking accountability for the mess he'd made, and had begun cleaning it up. He was also in the process of trying not to make any more messes, which involved making sure nobody got close to creating an Iron Man copy. Especially Hammer.

But, as far as he knew, Rhino had nothing to do with Spiderman, and yet, here the guy was, cleaning up a mess that wasn't even his fault, wasn't really even related to him much, even though, from what Tony had seen, he got nothing but hate for it. Spiderman was here helping because he cared about people beyond him and his small circle of friends. Spiderman was here because he was a good person.

Tony was still only looking after his own ass, under the guise of caring about other people. He was fixing his mistakes, only because they were his fault. The question, however: was that enough? Was it

enough to be who he was right now, fixing only his mistakes and nothing more, or did he want to go further and help people simply because he wanted to help people?

Tony's easy answer was, surprisingly, the second one, without doubt, but he wasn't really sure how to get there.

Spiderman successfully finished off Rhino, encasing him almost completely in webbing from head to toe so he looked like an extremely angry caterpillar. He turned back to Tony and mock saluted.

"Thanks for the assist, Hoss," he called, sounding completely sincere despite the fact that the only thing Tony had done was distracted him and nearly gotten himself killed. Spiderman shot off a web and ran a few steps before it caught and he sailed away. Tony pretended not to notice the more-than-slight limp in his step, obviously from his battle with Rhino, in which Tony hadn't helped at all."

Tony realized that the only times he'd helped other people with no benefit to himself was when he wasn't thinking at all, like just this morning when he'd charged off to fight a supervillain without a thought. But the problem with not thinking was a lot of the times your impulsiveness could get you or other people hurt or killed. Tony had come in here half-cocked, and he hadn't been able to help because he had no idea how to fight a supervillain, while Spiderman had around seven months of experience.

Tony wanted to help other people. He really did. But he couldn't do anything if he kept acting like he was. Yinsen was the first step, Spiderman the second, and Tony knew there would be more steps in the future--most of them not enjoyable, going by his track record. Yinsen had taught him that, informed view or not, his every action had the potential of hurting somebody, and when they inevitably did, it was his job to step up and try to fix it, or else somebody else would pay for it. Spiderman, through this brief, brief meeting, had just unwittingly told him that he could do a lot more than just fix his own actions. You could step past your boundaries to help people, and a lot of the time it would end with getting trash thrown at you, like Spiderman was, but it made a difference if you knew what the hell you were doing.

Tony had flown home, and taken a breather. So far, he'd been doing everything half-cocked and unplanned, and it was probably going to hurt somebody if he kept it up. He needed to get his thoughts straight and come up with a plan of action before he did anything else; find out if his lightbulb was worth screwing in.

(It was.)

* * *

><p>It sounded cheesy, even now, but Tony stuck to it. Spiderman, somebody he'd barely known at the time, had pushed him over the edge from just fixing his own messes to actually helping people. If it wasn't for the palladium poisoning, he probably wouldn't have committed long enough to really change, but it was Spiderman that had pushed that lesson into his mind in the first place.<p>

He'd never told the other hero, of course. How do you even go about doing that? In thanks, though, he'd seized the merchandising rights

in a legal clusterfuck that left even his top lawyers with their heads spinning, but they'd managed it. Now, all the profits were sitting in an offshore account, slowly gathering dust and interest as the number racked up. Tony had tried to tell Spidey about it several times, but since the only time they met up was during supervillain attacks, he'd never found the time to sit his favorite red-suited vigilante down and tell him that he had claim to what had to be several million dollars by now.

Tony frowned, and flicked the _Spider2_ file aside to open the _Second Greatest Superhero Vigilante in New York_ file, and flicked through it until he found the tracked profits listing.

Twenty-two million dollars. Spiderman currently had twenty-two million dollars in American currency currently sitting somewhere in an offshore account, and he didn't even know. Tony would tell him right now, but as stated before, he wasn't 100% sure this was the original Spidey, and he wasn't going to take that chance. This money belonged to Spiderman, or, in the case that he was dead, Spiderman's family.

He'd only talked about his family a handful of times, at least to Tony, and Tony had a feeling he hadn't really told many other people, mostly because Spiderman was tragically alone because of his kept secret identity. Tony had asked him why he bothered to keep one once, which was one of the only times he'd spoken about his personal life.

They'd been sitting of the top of a building downtown then, watching the 7:00 PM traffic flow far beneath them. Spidey had once mentioned that one of the better parts of having abilities was easy access to views like this one, and Tony could hardly disagree.

Three discarded cups from the protein smoothie place they'd ordered from were littered between them for later disposal. Tony was working of the bottom of his second smoothie, while Spiderman was sucking on his third. Another smoothie cup waited by his hand for after Spidey finished this one. Spiderman had never outright mentioned what made him eat so much. It could be anything from an advanced metabolism, to not having enough food at home, to just the fact that crime-fighting and supervillain brawling certainly worked up an appetite, but every time they ate with each other after battle, he consumed a lot of food. Tony was only all too happy to pay for it all, since the kid was basically a twig with muscles, and therefore far too light and easy for supervillains to throw around.

Spiderman had stilled when Tony had asked why he kept a secret identity. Tony didn't understand; it seemed like far too much of a hassle. SHIELD had tried to rope him into keeping one, but he was fairly sure that they'd only done that just so they could force him into a couple more corners than he could maneuver out of. Tony was genuinely curious, though; to him, having a secret identity kind of seemed like an unnecessary burden.

Spiderman had taken his time thinking up a good answer, finishing his third smoothie and moving onto his fourth. Finally, he took the straw from his lips and shrugged a little, setting the smoothie aside and staring out at the cityscape.

"It's... complicated," Spiderman had said, smacking his lips. "At

first, I was kind of just watching my ass. Iâ€"uh," he took a deep breath and ran a hand over his masked head before looking at Tony, determination set in his visible jaw, since his mask was pulled up to his nose, and Tony knew that shit had just gotten deep. Something important was about to be shared with him. Tony perked up to attention, settling into one of his very rare serious moods.

"The whole reason I started thisâ€"" Spiderman gestured at his costume, and then out at the city, "â€"is because I wanted revenge, I guess. Something bad happened toâ€"" Spiderman's voice cracked a little, but he simply clenched his fists and forged forward.

"Somebody important to me died, and it was my fault, okay? I made a mistake and..." He trailed off, looking away for a while, before inhaling deeply.

"Anyway, I was angry. I wanted to fix my mistake, so I went for revenge." This was starting to sound uncomfortably familiar to Tony. "Anyway, I tracked the dude down, nearly killed him." Spiderman took another deep breath. "I didn't; stopped to ask myself if that's what my Uâ€", er...the person who mattered to me, would have wanted, and it wasn't. At all. I dropped the guy off a building, caught him at the last moment with my webs, and the cops collected him. I headed home, thinking I'd done the right thing, the best I could do."

Tony wanted to interject at this point, because he could tell Spidey with absolute certainty that he had much better morals than Tony had ever had, or ever would have. If somebody killed Rhodey or Pepper, you could be damn sure they'd be dead as soon as Tony could find them. He sensed there was more to this story, though, so he kept his mouth shut.

"On my way home,"' Spiderman continued, sounding a little less morose. "I heard something. It was late at night, and it's New York, right? I walked right past an alley where three guys were just on the edge of raping this girl. I almost didn't look back, but I was still running on adrenaline and anger, and there was this old lesson the person I cared about had said ringing in the back of my head. Kind of my motto nowadays." Spiderman let out a little self-deprecating laugh, and Tony's heart twinged.

"It doesn't even matter, but when I walked past that alley, I just couldn't leave it alone, y'know? I had no experience in fighting, I didn't know what I was doing. I charged in there angry and impulsive, and I barely made it out. One of the guys got me in the side with an army knife, but the girl had had the good sense to run away by then, so I scaled the wall and followed her example."

Spiderman shook his head, taking a sip of his smoothie. "One of them yelled after me. It was stupid, something to scream when you're frustrated that your target got away from you. 'I know what you look like'," Spiderman repeated in a pitched voice. "'I can find you!'. He never did, of course. It was an empty threat, but it kinda spoke to me. What if he had bothered to track me down? I'd just lost somebody important to me, and this stupid action of saving the girl could have hurt the other person that I cared about. But, like I said, I was running on adrenaline and impulse, and, in my mind, I shouldn'tâ€"couldn't _not_ help people, but the other person that mattered to me would get hurt otherwise, so I made this stupid costume," Spiderman waved a dismissive hand. "At first it was just some ski goggles and a hoodie, but my sticky ability doesn't work

well through tennis shoes, and the whole thing escalated, and, well..." He shrugged, motioning inward at himself.

"Now we're here," Spidey said. "And I can't take my mask off because I'd be putting somebody who has nothing to do with this at risk, and she doesn't deserve to have a supervillain come down on her head. I could always quit being Spiderman, but that..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "But that isn't an option I consider anymore, y'know? I don't care how many cars I have to get hit by, or how many knives I get stabbed with; as long as I help that one person who wouldn't get help otherwise, it's worth it. But the secret identity, that's because I still have a responsibility to the people around me who haven't chosen this life. I can't, cannot, let her suffer because of a choice I made, alright? Even letting her know, making her worry over me, is too much. She deserves the world, she deserves a lot better than me. It's just—" Spidey cut himself off, and angrily stuck the straw back in his mouth, sucking with a vengeance.

They stay in silence for a while, Spiderman sucking down his smoothie, and Tony processing the fact that he was sitting next to literally the single most selfless fucking guy in New York, and the dude didn't even know. Tony could also observe the similarities between their stories, and the differences. Spiderman, though he called himself such, was much, much less impulsive than Tony. He'd thought out most his decisions, and had made a choice to hold everybody, even the criminals he fought, in higher regard than himself, going by the way he refused to hurt his criminals if he could avoid it. He'd made a choice to put the entirety of New York before himself, and though it wasn't a bad thing in any terms to take care of other people, Tony was genuinely concerned by how little value the other hero had for himself.

Tony vowed to himself right then and there that he was going to protect this fucking kid, because nobody else out there seemed to care to. If he wasn't going to tell the person that was important to him that he was Spiderman, Tony couldn't make him, but what he could do was protect Spiderman in their place, even if it meant protecting him from himself.

* * *

><p>Tony bit his lip at the memory. Spiderman may have the split abilities of a human and a spider, but he had the self-preservation instincts of neither. That particular set of instincts seemed to have been left out of his common sense, Tony had quickly discovered, and taken it upon himself to serve as Spiderman's protector, because Spiderman himself was obviously not going to stand up to the job.</p>

So far, Tony had never had to do anything too drastic, but there had been a few occasions when it had been a situation in which any other hero would have run for the hills to keep themselves unhurt and alive, but the runt just charged in without a single damn care in the world, which made Tony come in after him because without supervision he might actually get himself killed.

The worst part was, Tony wasn't even exaggerating. The kid was absolutely determined to save every single life in New York, except his own. He was going to give Tony even more heart problems then he

already had, Jesus Christ. Though, it wasn't all bad. Tony had a really bittersweet memory of the time Spides had almost caught on to his then-desperate palladium poisoning.

* * *

><p>Rain was an odd feeling in the suit. No water got in, but the air through the vent shafts was always moist and cool, which was a switch up from the air in the countries the Ten Rings plagued. There was also the constant soft pinging sound of a dozen little water droplets beating down on the exterior of the suit.</p>

Tony knew it wasn't wise to fly in a thunder storm, but he needed an outlet or else he was going to explode. He'd set everything into motion, had successors in every line he needed them in. Pepper had his company, Rhodey had his suit, Natalie had his secret, though she probably didn't know the extent of it yet.

Why shouldn't he fly in a thunderstorm? He didn't know how much damage a bolt of lightning could do while wearing the suit, but if it did kill him, thatâ€"would that be worse? It'd probably be painful for the second or two it lasted, but less painfulâ€"both physically and emotionallyâ€"then slowly, slowly dying over a few horrible months because of metal poisoning.

Tony wanted to hit something. He went looking for trouble, because why the hell not? Tony wasn't exactly suicidal but he barely had any hope of being alive by next month, so why the fuck not?

He found it, in the shape of the fucking Frightful Four, and ohh, hadn't he had a field day at that name in comparison to the Fantastic Four! Screw Reed Richards, okay? Tony may have been on par with him in arrogance, but he was smart enough to know that if you were married to somebody as nice, beautiful, and caring as Sue Storm, you didn't treat her like Reed fucking treated her. Besides, Reed was absolutely _not_ smarter than Tony, especially not if he got himself rubberized because he miscalculated the timing and arrival of a space cloud when he could have just looked out a fucking window.

When Tony got down closer to the Frightful Four, he realized that a certain spider superhero was already doing his job for him, though he did look like he was struggling a little. Each of the Frightful Four were easy to defeat on their own, but working together, they were pretty difficult. He'd gotten his ass handed to him the first time he took them on all at once, but the weak link of the group was Trapster. If you riled him up enough he'd wildly shoot glue at anything while trying to hit you, including his own teammates.

Spiderman normally opted for the less collateral damage option of the game, and took the Four on two at a time, flinging them into and webbing them onto each other; basically just using their own teammates against them. Unfortunately, Wizard worked from afar, and the antigravity tech he used messed with Spidey's web propulsion so that the webs only got him around half the time, though it looked like he had gotten better for knowing the range in which Spidey's webs could actually snag him.

Tony rocketed down and slammed Wizard into the ground, no mercy. He was not in a good mood today, and hitting around some supervillains

with his favorite webbed wonder was sure to at least blow off some steam he couldn't with anybody else.

That was the thing about Spiderman: he understood the necessary secrets. He was keeping his own secret identity from a certain female family member (Tony hadn't worked out if it was a daughter or a sister or a mother or even a wife, yet, but that wasn't really pertinent) to keep her from worrying, and though Tony wasn't entirely sure he agreed with the choice, he would respect it. And he knew Spiderman would do the same for him.

Which is why, as soon as Tony was done kicking Wizard and Klaw's ugly behinds, and Spiderman had maneuvered Thundra and Trapster so they were stuck together in Trapster's own glue, he turned towards Spiderman, pointed to the top of a nearby skyscraper, and then rocketed towards it, heading for the roof.

It was an unofficial thing they did, race each other to the top of buildings. Tony usually won, but they both knew he had an unfair advantage, being able to fly. Still, the races came surprisingly close most times; Spiderman was shockingly inventive, and he definitely knew how to use his webs.

Tony won, but Spiderman clambered up after him around thirty seconds later, heaving a breath. Tony would normally make a joke now, but today, he really wasn't feeling it.

Apparently, Spiderman noticed, because he sat down right next to Tony and looked over at him. He looked like a wide-eyed child, with the oversized white lenses of his eyes. Tony wished he wouldn't ask, but it seemed like more and more lately, Tony wasn't getting what he wanted.

"What's wrong?" his rooftop companion asked. His voice was a little too loud, probably a side effect from Klaw trying to destroy his eardrums, but Tony paid it no mind.

He knew he shouldn't say anything, because Spiderman was smart, and he knew Tony pretty well for somebody who Tony didn't even know the name or face of. Tony's impulse control, though, wasn't the best.

"If..." Tony began, hesitating. "If you only had seven days to live, what would you do?"

It would probably be considerable time longer than a week, but the meaning remained the same.

Spiderman stilled beside him. Tony had known the guy long enough to pick up on little habits and tells of his, so he knew this meant he was in serious thought. Spiderman was always moving, kicking his legs, tapping his fingers, moving his head to the beat of an inaudible tune. The only time he stopped moving entirely was when he was being very serious, which was rare. Like Tony, he used humor as a sort of defensive mechanism.

Finally, he replied. "I... would get all my affairs in order. Like, make sure nothing went out to the wrong people. I would tell the people closest to me that they mattered, try to get everything out of the way so I didn't feel like I was leaving them behind with

unfinished business."

Tony didn't respond, but his mind crept up on the response and flipped it over, scouring it for any knowledge it held. As far as responses to that question went, it was fairly generic, and Tony was sure that if there weren't so many secrets between the two of them, he would have gotten a much better response. But, like it or not, the secrets were there, and the answer, though common, was sincere enough.

It was just "ugh, he didn't know. He'd hoped his fellow superhero would have some widely unknown superhero knowledge to distribute upon him and suddenly give him the peace of mind to, he didn't know, let him die happy, or whatever. Too much to ask for, he supposed, but he could hope, right?

"Is there..." Spiderman fidgeted uncomfortably next to him. "Is there anything I can do? If there's anything"

Tony cut him off there, knowing pretty much exactly how the conversation would flow if he let the question end, and he couldn't let it go down that path, because he might actually break down.

"It was just a question," Tony lied. "I promise, I'll still be around eight days from today."

Spiderman stilled again, staring at Tony with large, unreadable white eyes. Tony was half afraid that he'd seen right through him, but after a moment he shrugged and stood up. "You better," he said, something strange in his tone, before giving a little mock two finger salute, and back flipping off the building. He knew as well as Tony that this conversation was over.

* * *

><p>Tony was fairly sure Spiderman had picked up on more than he let on, but he'd never said anything outright, even after the fact, and Tony was only too happy to let the matter lie. Death was a tough subject in any setting, but especially for superheroes. Within the Avengers, they tended to avoid the subject like it was taboo, like they were jinxing themselves. Any one of them could come back dead from the next mission from Fury, or more recently, a supervillain attack right outside the Tower, in good old New York City. Another unfortunate thing about Spiderman's change was that potential supervillains were taking it as a sign to do whatever evil thing they wanted, and Tony was lucky that all of the Avengers had somehow silently agreed to join him on supervillain runs now, because he was almost positive he couldn't do it on his own.</p>

Case in point: the pink goo. He probably would have never gotten out of there in time if the other Avengers weren't there, and the pink glop would have just consumed him before moving onto the civilians near it. Hell, Tony wasn't entirely sure what they would have done even all together if they hadn't had Thor at their disposal.

Continued shaving off little bits until the goop was small enough to contain, he supposed, but how would they have gone about that? As far as he was aware, there might not be a single composition out there that the glop couldn't dissolve and consume, including the ground. It would have taken at least a week to move the proper equipment into Times Square to dissolve the goop, and unless they had shifts to keep

it from growing too large, they'd have been fucked.

Yeah, so, Thor was definitely helpful. All of the Avengers were helpful. And Jane and Darcy were definitely worth keeping around for sciencing purposes, if not for Thor purposes. It's not like money was exactly a problem for Tony, so he could afford to house anybody it took to make the Avengers more comfortable, along with the Avengers themselves, like Falcon and hopefully Spiderman himself one day. The supervillain problem was showing itself to be more than just an issue for New York, though it was definitely focused around said city, and it certainly wouldn't hurt to have a few more people to help out when they had to fly out of state, or even country, to deal with something other than Hydra.

In terms of supervillains, Tony considered Spiderman an expert. It was mostly because there was nobody else around anymore that had been dealing with them as long as Spiderman had, but his point still stood. And it certainly wouldn't hurt to have a supervillain "expert" around to help them fight supervillains, even if he didn't want to join the Avengers. However, it would be kind of nice if he could talk them about it. That led him back to finding out whatever was up with Spiderman, and fixing it, if he could.

Ugh. Tony was so frustrated. He was better with robots and code, where every problem had a solution if you just fixed a bit of faulty wiring, or re-typed the binary somewhere. People were... messy, and even easy fixes, like apologies, were sometimes more complicated than they seemed at face value. That was even accounting for the bigger, more emotional problems like love, or death, or grief.

Wait. Grief... was that it?

* * *

><p>One of the only times Tony had ever seen Spiderman truly vulnerable, emotionally or physically, was sitting at the top of the Brooklyn Bridge. He'd run across him by pure chance, but that was actually how a lot of their meetings happened, with just a dash of supervillain mischief mixed in, so Tony thought nothing of it.</p>

The web-slinger was perched on the edge of one of the spires of the bridge, looking down at the dark water below. There was something different about his posture, though, something that offset Tony. It made him hesitate a little in the air before landing on the spire behind Spiderman.

Spidey didn't even look like he was paying attention, really. He twitched a little when Tony hit the spire with a dull clank, but other than that, he barely moved. Maybe that was what bothered Tony the most; Spiderman was hardly ever static. He was always moving, always speaking, always animate, except in the most serious of times, and even then there were little things. Right now, he could have been mistaken for a statue. Stock still, staring down at the glimmering water below. His mask was unreadable, and Tony was half afraid he was going to jump off.

He wasn't sure what to say, what to do in a situation like this; he wasn't even sure what was wrong. He almost stepped out of the Iron Man armor, but then thought better of it, just in case his suspicion

was right. He moved to sit down next to Spiderman with what seemed like a painfully loud clank, in the absence of Spiderman's usual chatter.

The silence came back. It seemed too prominent, too oppressive. It pressed down on his shoulders, weighed down on his head. He could practically feel the sorrow radiating off Spiderman in waves. It was obvious in the tilt of his shoulders, the slump of his spine, and the complete atmosphere surrounding them both in a heavy aura. Something had happened. Something bad.

Tony was never particularly patient, or very polite. He rushed conversations because there was only a very small group of people he enjoyed speaking with, and even with them, small talk was pointless. Skipping to the juicy bits of every conversation was what he did. He could talk with Bruce for hours about scientific theories and experiments, but speaking about the weather, or a plane that went down in the Atlantic? Unless you showed him the plane's schematics, so he could identify the error and then fix it, he wasn't interested.

This particular incident, though, he was willing to wait. He felt "no, he knew, that if he pushed, it'd do one of two things. It'd either upset Spiderman, like it had done with so many before, or, more likely in this case, it would push him too far. Tony wasn't entirely sure what would happen after that, but he was sure he wouldn't like it. Not just because he wasn't good with emotions, but also because he didn't want Spidey to be angry with him. Tony considered Spiderman a friend, even if he wasn't entirely sure it was mutual, and he'd lost too many friends to scare another one off—"one as cool and nice as Spiderman, to boot"—over something like this.

Time passed by. At least twenty minutes, if not more. Spider-Man's breath kept making this hitching, wheezy noise that made Tony think he was about to cry, or maybe start hyperventilating, but it never went past just breathing. Finally, he clenched his fists together and turned his entire body towards Tony, and another thirty seconds passed by while he breathed deeply before his tense shoulders lowered just an inch and his white lenses stared straight into Tony's eyes.

"Why?" he asked, and his tone of voice was so wretched, so weighted, that a wave of sympathy rose up from the bottom of his stomach.

Tony shrugged, maybe a little vaguely, at the man sitting across from him. He wasn't entirely sure what the 'why' was for? Why was he sitting there? Why was he waiting? Why had whatever happened, happened? Why was so unfair? Why did it hurt so much, afterward?

"Youâ€", Spiderman cut himself off, abruptly, his entire body language radiating sadness and hurt. "I justâ€"" he started again, and stopped just as quickly. He paused, leaning back, and sighed one of the heaviest sighs Tony had ever heard. "Thisâ€"I'm not belittling you, but you wouldn'tâ€"_can't_, understand, okay? So if you want me to explain, you can take your pretty suit of armor and go, justâ€"I, I'm not trying toâ€""

"Hey," Tony said softly, holding up his hands, palms facing forward.

"No, okay. I'm not going to get it. It's your personal experience, and there are probably little pieces I can sympathize with, but the whole puzzle is beyond me. Just... if you want an ear."

Tony's subconscious was really confused on why he was doing this. He wasn't a shrink; in fact, he actively avoided them, so it was a bit confusing on why he'd offer to act like one to Spiderman. He had the answer to that in a can't-put-into-words kinda way, though, at the very forefront of his mind. It was just a feeling, y'know? Not anything to say, just to feel.

Spiderman stared at him for a little while, his thin frame trembling. He looked like he was actively trying not to break down. After a while, he kinda shrugged to himself and his head fell down to his chest. Tony could hear the shuddering breath he sucked in shakily before he ran a hand over his masked head and exhaled in the same shaky manner.

"Sheâ€"she was, it's just... right? I don't know if you... No, I just can'tâ€"Iâ€" Spiderman breathed in and out again, visibly composing myself. "She was so happy, all the time, y'know? I never really got it before I fell in love with her; there was so much horrible stuff in the world, and I saw New York's underbelly on a daily basis doing this gig.

"But then, likeâ€"I don't know, it didn't happen all at once. It was really slow, and painful. We fought, and screamed at each other, and one time there was this argument over, well, I don't actually remember now, but it was so stupid, and we spent like three hours making out after I finally apologized. When she found out about this whole mess," he gestured down at the Spiderman suit, "we almost broke up. She threw a couple books at my head, and I dodged because I knew she wasn't really trying to hurt me, and there was so much crying, and she kept screaming about me lying to her and it was one of the worst hours of my life, and I've almost bled to death on the roof of an abandoned building before.

"But afterwards, after every fight we had, things were just a little better, and this one was no different. That's how relationships are supposed to be, right? You learn and grow through the relationship, together, and sometimes it's rough and you fight, but it's all worth it because when you make up you learned something brand new about the person you love, and you choose to accept it if you make up with them. And she chose to accept it, chose to accept me, and we just kept learning, and growing, and fighting sometimes, untilâ€"

His voice cut off, suddenly, which was strange considering how passionately he's been rambling. He motioned down at the river below, at the spire they were sitting on, and Tony could see self-loathing and sorrow in every line of his body.

"It's like every other relationship, really. Sure, we had problems to deal with that other people didn't, like that one time she found me bleeding out in the alley outside her apartment and nearly had a panic attack, but when you looked at the simple things, it was just a relationship. A good one, one with a spectacular, brilliant, shining star in it, but still."

Spiderman shrugged, looking back down at the water below. "It's kinda ironic, actually. She was one of the only reasons I_ truly_ lived,

and I'm the reason she died. Maybe that doesn't make sense, I don't even understand, I just—"

He stopped, swallowed, and shrugged, not even raising his gaze from the dirty water below. Tony hesitated, and then lightly rested his gauntlet on Spiderman's shoulder. "I get that. Not everything, but that."

Another few minutes passed. Spiderman looked back up, straight at him. "I—"should I... stop? I've been thinking about it a lot. Maybe it's just like all the newspapers and talk shows and everybody else who has an opinion says. I'm not helpful, right? I attract trouble, and I do the police's job and only get in the way. The only thing I've ever done is hurt people, by keeping secrets and lying and, and causing supervillain's I created to—"to come after the people I love. I'm just... in the way. I've done enough damage as it is. I should stop, now, before somebody else gets hurt."

Tony wasn't good with people. They were messy, and most of the time it wasn't as easy as re-writing a strip of code or fixing some faulty wiring to get them in working order again, especially when they got as broken as this. Tony couldn't think of what to do, besides give a rousing pep talk, but he wasn't good at those either.

He was going to try anyway, dammit.

"There was this one story you told me," Tony began, and he knew just from that start that this was going to be an absolutely horrendous pep talk. "About, like, how this whole thing began. I think we were drinking smoothies, I'm not really clear on the details. I might've been a little drunk."

Spiderman made a kind of confused noise next to him, though he still managed to make it sound sad as hell, too, and god, Tony's heart could not handle much more sad Spiderman.

"Anyway, you were telling me why you kept a secret identity, but that's not what this is about. Or, like, I suppose it could be. You told me you had somebody you loved who you needed to protect, so it was worth it, and that's the whole point, right? I'm all for protecting loved ones, and if that's what you need to do, I'm alright with that, but, again, not the point. The point was, in that rousing speech, you said that you were doing this to protect other people, and if you could help just one person who wouldn't get help otherwise, you'd be happy. I understand if you just want the people you care about to be safe. Hell, that was my entire motivation before I met you, just to protect the very few people I cared about. But you? Every single moment I've known you, you've been the most self-sacrificing little shit I've ever known, throwing yourself into burning buildings face-first because maybe that girl's dad is in there. I don't know, do what you think is best, I'm not trying to guilt trip you or whatever, I just want you to... ugh, I don't know, make a decision that is just a tad less knee-jerk. I'm bad at this."

"Yeah," Spiderman agreed. "You are."

They sat in silence for a while longer, before Spiderman lifted his knees and got to his feet. He looked over his shoulder at Tony.

"Hey," he said, sounding like he was trying to smile under his mask,

and probably failing miserably. "Thanks, okay? I'm... not sure, but I'll think about it."

Spiderman disappeared after that, for about two weeks, before he suddenly showed up right in the middle of one of Rhino's rampages through the streets, putting a stop to it in a minute flat, when the cops had already spent hours chasing the guy. Tony smiled like a maniac over his coffee when he saw the news, but only Pepper knew.

* * *

><p>Grief did crazy things to Spiderman. He had extremely strong reactions when one of his loved ones died. The first death, or at least Tony assumed, had led to the beginning of Spiderman. The second death had almost led to the end of him. If there had been a third death, Tony could only assume that the reaction would be strong, and this reaction certainly counted as strong. Maybe not as much as the other two, but maybe this one wasn't as personal.</p>

The problem with death: it was unfixable. The only solution was time, and even then it was a painful, dirty process that didn't always go as planned. Just over four months of silence from Spiderman. Sure, that was an appropriate mourning period, but...

Tony wasn't sure. He felt like he was onto something, but at the same time, the details, the patterns, didn't match up in his head. He'd write it down anyway. Every theory counted. Maybe something else would occur to him when he was thinking it over, and everything would suddenly pop into place.

Yeah, no. But he could hope.

10. Chapter 10

Peter held his breath as he peered around the corner, as if even the slight movement marking the rise and fall of his chest might give him away. This was the third time he'd peeked, but there were always people in the way, and he had to be sure. He did not have enough energy in him for a chase, even after the great nap he'd just had.

It had ended how around half of his naps did these days--"with a nightmare. This one had taken a nice break from Gwen and Aunt May to give him a refresher course on his parents' deaths. Delightful. He only wished he had someone to share it with.

Sam hadn't been there when he'd woken up, but that wasn't any more than Peter expected. Less than he'd hoped, maybe, but he couldn't honestly expect Sam to just hang around and wait until he woke up. At least they'd left his food under the bench, along with a note scribbled on the side of the bag telling Peter that there had been an emergency and that they'd had to leave right away. Peter didn't think Sam would lie about something like that, so maybe there really was an emergency. Whatever.

Peter couldn't help but feel weird, thinking about it. The feeling wasn't really worry, exactly, but it wasn't dissimilar from it. He decided he should probably just stop thinking about it and focus on the task at hand.

The worryingly skinny mother tugged her two slightly less skinny children towards the soup stand, and gave Peter a clear view to the one section of the homeless shelter he hadn't been able to see fully before now. As far as he could see, there were no oddly formally dressed people hanging around, which meant that there were no CPS agents around to flag him down as a missing kid and chase him until he got around a corner fast enough to scramble up a wall. Yay.

Just in case, Peter did one last quick look around the shelter, but he didn't see anybody that didn't look like they belonged there. Either homeless people, like him, or kind-eyed volunteers who wouldn't give him a second glance as long as he kept his head down and didn't do anything stupid. He wasn't even here for food or shelter, so that should be easy.

Peter shoved himself up from the wall he was leaning on and stepped forward, making his way towards the bins full of discarded or donated clothes. A spare glove would probably be one of the rarer items to be found, but it wasn't completely out of the question.

His hand was getting uncomfortably cold on patrols as Spiderman, and the only thing he could think to do was grab a spare glove from a donated pile of clothes and make due until he could afford new cheap spandex. He'd done a similar thing a few months back when he was getting too cold in just spandex, and had worn his jacket over the costume, as well as shoving leg warmers underneath the tights part of his costume for extra insulation. He'd donated them back as soon as he could; he was sure there was somebody out there who needed them more than him.

After weaving between several equally smelly and exasperated people, he got to the sagging cardboard boxes of the clothes section in this particular homeless shelter. He couldn't help but feel a little nervous being here, even though he was sure there were no CPS agents around. He didn't really trust homeless shelters after his first couple of experiences, which included everything from being chased down like a criminal by CPS agents, to having to stand in line for hours for clean water, to actually getting mugged by a couple of other homeless people. Yeah, Spiderman got mugged. He saw the irony.

He couldn't really blame them, though. He wasn't nearly as desperate a case as others out there, and just because he hadn't tipped over the edge yet...Let's just say, Spiderman had been going a little softer on petty robberies lately. Or at least those executed by people who looked like they had decent motive, instead of teenagers just wanting to do something stupid.

>
Like being a superhero_.

Ouch, that one actually stung a little.

Don't judge him, okay? Peter had a snark quota to meet each week and now he had nobody besides himself to be sassy with. He was doing his best to keep his head above water.

There were no gloves in the box he was rooting through, so he moved onto the next one. He knew very well that he might not have any luck here, but he'd walked over thirty blocks to get to a decent homeless shelter that was far enough from the park that he wouldn't have to

abandon the bench if a CPS agent did spot him.

It was kinda strange, knowing this much about being homeless after only four months at it. He'd always been told that he was a pretty fast learner, and that was a necessity when living homeless. Besides, he had... experiences, from being Spiderman, that had "prepared" him for this pretty well. Looking for people who stood out, like formally dressed people in homeless shelters, or knowing how to lose somebody following you... About as useful as they sounded, in context.

He came across a glove elbow-deep in the third box he'd dug through. It was for the wrong hand, but that was easily fixed by turning it around and ignoring the smiling butterfly that told him that it went on his left hand, silly! It fit a little oddly, but the fingertips were worn through enough that Peter could stick his hand to his left bicep with no problem. It was also bright purple, but clashing colors were the least of Peter's problems right now, so he ignored it and flexed his fingers a little inside the glove. It was too small, especially around the finger length, but it was the first glove Peter had found, and he wasn't betting on finding another. Or even the match to this one.

Peter stood up and hunched his shoulders in a little, planning on heading for the nearest alleyway and giving the glove a test run, so to speak. Out of the corner of his eye, though, he spotted a tiny, scarily thin little blonde girl. She couldn't have been much older than six, and was eyeing the box he's just been rifling through while clutching a threadbare teddy bear in a white-knuckled grip.

Peter looked back at the box, pressing his lips together nervously. It took him all of two seconds to see what she was eyeing. A very old, very ratty red hoodie sweatshirt that Peter had shoved over the side of the box while looking for a glove. Peter paused for a moment, glancing back at the girl, before reaching down and snatching the sweatshirt.

The girl quietly squeaked a little, as if in protest, but then her eyes went wide as Peter turned around and held it out to her in offering. Her little mouth dropped open in a small 'o' and her eyes flicked back between the sweatshirt and Peter. After about five rounds of this, she reached a hesitant hand out towards the sweatshirt, like Peter was going to suddenly snatch it back from her. Peter shoved his shoulder forward a little more, and waited until the little girl's fist clamped around the fabric of the sweatshirt before letting go. The girl startled a little when the fabric Peter was holding up suddenly went limp, but then she tilted her head to the side and looked at Peter again. Peter's legs were starting to feel weird from crouching for so long.

"'m Emily," she declared in a soft voice, looking shy.
"Thanks."

Peter shrugged a little and gave her a small half-smile that he was only sort of feeling. She beamed at him anyway, and clutched both the sweatshirt and her teddy bear tighter.

"You ever read the story of Little Red Riding Hood?" she asked, looking hopeful. "My sister has this big book of fairy tales, like that. Little Red Riding Hood's my favorite."

Peter's smile edged a little wider, and he motioned down at the hoodie in question. He wasn't sure the girl would be able to understand him, she was so little, and non-verbal communication was hard for the best of them, but his fears were for nothing, because she just grinned at him and nodded emphatically.

Peter pressed his lips together again, and picked up the sweatshirt, getting his hands on the hem and holding it open, motioning his best to Emily to communicate his attention. This little girl was apparently extremely adept at talking without words, because she just smiled wider and ducked her head a little so Peter could help her put the sweatshirt on.

Once it was all the way over her head, and Peter had made sure her arms weren't tangled in the sleeves, he shuffled backwards. Emily beamed at him out from under the too-large hood, a smile so large Peter was half-afraid her face would crack in half. Something warm settled in the pit of his stomach, and he couldn't help but smile back.

"Emily?!" he heard a panicked voice calling off from the left. He turned his head to look for the owner of the voice, immediately spotting a borderline hysterical blonde girl pushing through the crowd. Her eyes landed on the smiling little girl near Peter, and she immediately rushed over, crushing her in a desperate hug.

"Hey," she said, pulling back and pushing aside a stray piece of hair from Emily's face with her thumb. "I was scared about you. Please don't wander off like that. You're all I have left, don't let me lose you."

Peter bit his lip a little as he got up, silently slipping away from the two sisters' reunion. Neither of them noticed his departure, so after a second longer of watching the scene, Peter turned around and made his departure, weaving through various other homeless people until he finally made it to the exit.

Outside, he walked on the curb of the sidewalk to get around the mass of people crowded around the entrances, and finally managed to edge around a corner into a secluded alleyway. He glanced down at the glove once more, as if it had changed at all between the inside and outside of the shelter, before sighing a little and slipping it into his jeans pocket with the other glove, the one that matched the costume he was wearing underneath his clothes.

Peter pushed back his bangs—his hair was getting kinda long nowadays, sooner or later it was going to be a problem with the Spiderman mask and Peter would have to come up with a solution—and shuffled deeper into the alleyway, already seeing the fastest and easiest route to his nearest safe house in him mind. What he wasn't planning on, though, was having his Spidey sense warn him about three seconds before a group of five people emerged from the shadows, three of them wielding weaponry.

Peter stopped, blinking at them, a little surprised. He knew what they were about to try and do, of course. In his line of "work", muggers weren't exactly new material, but still. Were they really so desperate or so predatory they were hanging around a _homeless shelter_? What were they going to get? Handfuls of pocket change beggars had spent hours trying to mooch? They'd probably get more

money standing on a busy street corner harassing people in a hurry. Peter knew from experience that if you bothered somebody who was late, they'd throw change at you to just get you to go away.

The middle guy, obviously the leader, was wielding a knife, albeit a rusty one. The guy on his right held a damp board with nails in the end, while the girl on his left gripped a baseball bat. The other two were unarmed. Peter made a small mental note to stay firmly in the middle, because the "leader" would probably take him on headfirst, and that way he wouldn't have to deal with the girl, who looked like she knew what she was doing, or the slightly damp board, which looked like it could tear him up pretty badly if the guy managed to get a half-decent swing in.

"Empty your pockets," the leader spat, his lip curling up in unprovoked anger. Peter pressed his lips together, feeling resigned. He would happily hand over any pocket change he had, since they kinda looked like they needed it more than him, but he didn't have any money on him. He'd tell them that, but they didn't really look like they were up for charades. Of course, all he needed to do was empty his pockets and show them that he didn't have any money or food on him...

But then there was the issue of the Spiderman mask in his pocket. That was probably going to turn out to be a problem.

Peter reached into his jacket pockets and pulled out a couple pieces of lint and a toothpick, which he had no idea of how he'd obtained. Unfortunately, the leader had functioning eyes, and did a very poorly executed "threatening" move with the knife, and growled. "Jean pockets, too."

Peter was getting a little frustrated. He could understand how some people stooped to robbery and muggings; sometimes you had no other choice if you wanted to continue surviving. It kinda didn't seem like this guy was that far yet, though. He had a pretty cool knife, even though it was obvious he didn't know what he was doing with it. He had at least four other people with him, which meant that together they could probably pool their money and do something besides rob people, and it looked like they knew that, because they weren't wearing clothes with holes in them, at least. And finally, they were preying on people outside of homeless shelters, which...

Peter shook his head at the dude, hoping he'd cut his losses, and, at the same time, knowing that he wouldn't. The guy practically snarled, and surprised Peter by striding right up to him and grabbing the front of his hoodie, pushing him backwards forcefully to crowd him up against the wall to his back. Well, this didn't bring up memories of high school at all.

"I said," he spat through gritted teeth, "empty your fuckin' pockets, punk!"

His face was all scrunched up and angry, beady eyes glaring out from underneath excessively bushy eyebrows. He looked like a sexually frustrated fruit bat, or a wild hog whose face just got run over repeatedly by a redneck with an anti-vax bumper sticker. Peter wanted to tell him this, see what would happen, but tragically, he was unable.

He shook his head again, maintaining eye contact. A moment later, the guy's hand bunched in his hoodie and Peter was lifted right off the ground. This didn't surprise him of course, it was easier to lift things while their weight was braced on something else, like the wall Peter was being pushed against. Peter was also just shy of being half the guy's size, and he'd never tested the theory, but he was fairly certain the spider bite had somehow made him lighter, so the guy should be able to lift him with little to no strain. He felt the cool metal of the knife press against his throat.

"Empty your pockets," he repeated, like an especially criminal parrot. Peter felt half tempted to stick his tongue out at him, but he was also pretty sure that would end with the guy trying to cut it off, so he refrained. He shook his head again, partially because he couldn't do anything else, partially because he was feeling sassy and wanted to frustrate the guy. It's not like he couldn't just reach down and do it himself, if he was so desperate. What, was he in the business of mugging people, but only once they were afraid enough of him to hand over their stuff themselves?

"What are you, retarded?" the douche practically screamed, tiny drops of spittle flying from his lips to land on Peter's face. "Empty your fuckin' pockets, you little shit, and maybe if ya beg, I won't slit your throat for not doing it earlier."

"Slit your throat" were the words of that sentence that really resonated with Peter there. Not because he was afraidâ€"no way in hell. This doofus obviously didn't know what he was doing with the knife he was wielding, and Peter was confident he'd be able to disarm him in two seconds flat, if necessary. But the way he said the words, even as a threat, was too casual. Those words didn't mean anything to him anymore. He'd made that exact threat a hundred times before, to scared people who didn't know what to do, and yet, here he was, making it again.

"What are you waiting for, you fucking retar-" the guy was abruptly cut off when Peter's legs slammed into his chest. He flew backwards because of the force, and while he did Peter caught the wrist of the hand that had been holding the knife under his chin. He let the guy's hand and fingers slip through his grip, but tightened on the handle of the knife so the weapon was pulled from the man's loose fingers.

The guy tumbled backwards until he hit the guy wielding the board with nails in the end. The second guy made a surprised sound as he was forced off balance and instinctively let go of the board as both he and the leader guy tumbled to the ground. Meanwhile, Peter flipped the knife around in his grip and pulled his arm in so he was protecting his chest with the arm that held the knife in an obviously combative posture. If it came down to actual fighting, which Peter hoped it wouldn't, he'd throw the knife down the alley so neither side could get to it, because he fought better with just his body. As it was, Peter looked a lot more threatening with a weapon than without one. He just hoped a threat was enough.

The girl looked him up and down, then looked back at the two men trying to untangle themselves from each other, and the back at him. She pressed her lips together, and then held out her hand. "Gimme the knife and we'll call it fair."

Peter frowned at her. It was an understandable bargain. The knife was pretty nice, as far as street weapons went. Long and slightly curved, better than a kitchen knife, and probably more valuable. Peter wasn't too keen on giving it back to her, mostly because he was fairly certain she'd hand it right back to the jerk who'd just been threatening him with it.

"Stacey, no!" The leader guy called out pathetically, still struggling to lift himself. "We gotta teach this punk a lesson!"

"He's gonna teach us a lesson of we're not careful," the woman said, rolling her eyes. She turned back to him. "Kid, I'm throwing you a bone here. We'll leave you alone, just gimme the knife back."

Peter paused, and thought it over again, tilting his head to the side. It was a fair deal; she was being nice, even. To them it looked like it was five fully-grown adults against a confused, skinny teenager. Sure, he'd shown some skill, but even so, he was outnumbered, and two of them still had weapons.

And yet, if Peter gave the knife back, they'd go right back to doing this same routine on other people, and that was something Peter wasn't going to allow. He was freaking Spiderman, for crying out loud. It was against his very being to enable such obvious criminals like this. He shook his head.

"Have it your way," the woman sighed, and took a half step back. She waited long enough that Peter was almost caught off guard when she suddenly charged him, but he still managed to dodge the swing of the bat easily. He ducked under her second swing and braced his shoulder so when the third came, he caught the end of the bat and pulled it out of her grip with ease.

His spidey sense warned him to move aside as the guy with the board tried to attack him from behind. Peter 'tsk'ed, a hundred snarky quips that he couldn't verbalize all running through his head right then, and positioned the knife and the bat so when the next hit came, he stepped aside and maneuvered the two weapons he was holding to catch the board, and used the end of it to shove the guy back into the woman, sending them both sprawling, before pulling the board back so now he had all three weapons.

Only problem was, what to do with all three weapons? Scaling buildings required at least one hand, and, luckily for him, his spider powers hadn't come with any extra limbs. He couldn't carry all three with just one hand, and he couldn't just walk out onto the street carrying them.

First things first. Peter settled for temporarily dropping the knife and baseball bat and breaking the board over his knee, tossing the pieces down further into the alley. The woman, who was not as down as Peter had thought she was, made a mad grab for the knife, but Peter stomped on her hand, hissing sympathetically as she yowled. Grabbing up the knife and baseball bat again, he ran further down the alley, the two unarmed guys following him. Peter whirled around and stepped forward menacingly, fixing what he hoped was a scary expression on his face. Both of them stepped back, but the one on the right was giving him a weird look. Maybe Peter wasn't the best at terrifying facial expressions, but in his defense, he normally had the mask to

do most of the work for him.

Peter ran down the alley until he was sure he was out of sight from the muggers, then switched the baseball bat over to his left hand and braced his foot on the alley wall before pushing up and swinging his right hand around to stick to the wall. Climbing walls with only one hand was a breeze, but he was wearing tennis shoes right now, which meant he was doing it with only one hand, no sticky feet, which was a considerably harder task.

He made it to the top of the building with little struggle anyway. After all, with the loss of his webshooters, building-climbing was his main form of transportation as Spiderman. He was kind of a pro at it. It didn't hurt that the building was pretty short, too.

Peter did the old routine of jumping from rooftop to rooftop to make it to his safe house, except all these buildings were pretty short and small, with only tiny height differences, as opposed to the skyscrapers he was so used to. It meant he hardly ever had to stick to a wall and climb up the rest of the way, like he had to do with a lot of the skyscrapers. It was a refreshing change, and cut down travel time by a lot. And to think, he used to dislike the short-building neighborhoods because his webshooters were basically useless there. Huh.

It couldn't have been more than an hour before he reached his safe house, which was a nice break, since the sun was already two-thirds below the horizon line and sinking further, and Peter wanted to get in another small nap before going out on patrol. No more falling asleep around friends. And by friends he meant Sam, and various other Sam's (he'd remembered their names by now, Natasha and Steve, but he was keeping the nicknames he'd given them anyway). He had no other friends.

Peter jumped to the roof of one grimy warehouse from another warehouse roof. Another reason he was glad he'd gotten here before it was fully dark was that he might not be able to tell his warehouse apart from the other warehouses if he couldn't see the certain pattern of damaged shingles, or the slightly different color brown. Peter had always had a fairly good memory, but it had been put to the test ever since he'd become Spiderman, and been pushed even further after Aunt May had her heart attack.

Peter dropped through the broken window of his warehouse safe house, landing heavily on the half-rotten floorboards and closing his eyes, hoping they wouldn't give out underneath him. They hadn't yet, and they didn't disappoint this time. Peter got up from his crouch and retrieved the baseball bat, which he had accidentally dropped when he'd hit the floor.

There were no spiderwebs in the rafters, or at least none that had been made by him, which was unfortunate. Around eighty five percent of the criminals he fought were armed, and most of the time he left the weapon webbed up at the crime scene, along with the criminal. However, there were times when he forgot until he was halfway across the city, in which case he'd go to his nearest safe house and web it up there, sometimes with other weapons, until he remembered to drop a whole bundle off at the nearest police station.

He had around two dozen safe houses around New York, most of them

like this warehouse. This entire row of empty warehouses had been condemned years ago, but certain business papers had made the project grind to a halt "temporarily", while legal issues worked themselves out. A lot of his safe houses were in something of the same situation.

Of course, some of them varied wildly. There were three floors of a building office for some hotshot company nobody used anymore because they'd been declared storage, but had never stored anything. Except, of course, for him, and occasionally weapons, and the other various things he picked up.

New Yorkers were strange creatures, including himself, and occasionally somebody he saved would insist he take something from them for their gratitude. In one of his safe houses, another warehouse—though it was bigger and sturdier than this one, and in a more central location, right on the edges of Hell's Kitchen—had a huge Spiderman-made web woven in between its rafters, filled with everything from hair ribbons, to empty coffee cups, to various pins and buttons, to a veritable cornucopia of signed objects from various celebrities he'd saved. The only one he could remember right now was a signed book from that time he'd saved the mayor's life like six times in one day, because mercenaries had been after him, and the only reason he remembered that in particular was because it wasn't even the mayor's book, it was a version of the Catcher and the Rye the mayor had "borrowed" from one of his guard guys.

Peter wasn't a hoarder. If he was, he'd have all of this stuff packed up in his room or something. It just felt wrong throwing away or selling things that had been given to him with intention of gratitude. He'd given away some of the things to other people who he'd saved, yeah, but that was different. He was giving those things away with purpose. It was just different, okay?

Plus, he kinda liked looking at his little collections of given things. On bad days, it reminded him that not all New Yorkers hated him. It showed him he was making a difference to some people, made him feel wanted. That was always nice.

Okay yes, Peter was a giant sap. Everybody knew this by now. Didn't change anything.

Peter tossed the weapons in a corner and hoped no other homeless people wandered into this particular warehouse anytime soon, and then jumped up onto the wall and climbed up past the broken window, into the rafters, and over to the northeast corner, where three rafter sections met up and formed a small, but stable platform.

There were a couple half-shredded sheets, some towels that were hardly bloodstained at all, and what looked like a couch cushion, all shoved in the corner to form a very makeshift bed. Peter settled down on it, shifting uncomfortably a few times before he found a position where there wasn't something digging into his back.

He had beds like this set up in his safe houses from even before the whole heart attack mess, from when he was so bloody or bruised he couldn't head home that night at all, and had to crash somewhere and hope they healed up enough in the morning so that he could go to school without being fussed over.

In fact, he'd slept in the "beds" a lot before he's discovered the bench. But the bench was just as comfortable as most of his "beds", so Peter didn't mind sleeping there, though it did bring the extra risk of being found and reported. Peter had mostly avoided it, until he discovered the location of the bench was almost the direct epicenter of most street crime, which meant cutting down his travel time by, well, sometimes hours, actually. And it was secluded enough that the risk of being caught was a lot less than he originally thought.

Sam had absolutely nothing to do with his love for the bench, of course. Nope. It was all about the centralized location. That was his story and he'd stick with it.

Peter reached up and slapped the couch cushion, less for fluffing purposes than because he was frustrated with how flat it was. Like, run-over-by-a-school-bus, flat. He grabbed it and tossed it away, pretending not to notice hearing it hit the ground a second or so later. He'd deal with it in the morning.

After a while of tossing and turning, Peter finally managed to settle down enough that he could drift asleep. He felt a little out of his element, since it's been a while since he'd visited this safe house, but focusing on how high he was helped a little. It was a spider thing, he guessed. Being up high always felt better, safer.

After about five minutes where his mind kept cycling through things to think about besides Sam, and that embarrassing thing he did in sixth grade, he finally managed to just fall asleep. Yay.

11. Chapter 11

Sam wasn't going to lie: he was monumentally disappointed when they went back to the bench two days later and Peter was nowhere to be found. And that "moment" they'd had, which was somehow really different from everything they'd done before. He was half-scared he'd ruined whatever friendship they'd had by leaving in the middle of Peter's nap for an Avengers emergency.

The logical part of his brain told him that that was absolutely and completely ridiculous. It's not like he could have just stayed for the sake of sentimentality and let his friends, and the various other Avengers who didn't really count as friends yet, go on the Hydra sting operation alone. Well, he could, but... Yeah, that's not something you did.

Despite the fact that he kept reassuring himself it was fine, everything was absolutely fine, he still made sure to jog by the bench the very next day, both in the morning, and in an impromptu evening jog. No luck. He almost felt tempted to leave a note stuck under the bench or something, but that was just ridiculous.

"He's fine!" Natasha had called after him when he went passed through the Avengers Rec floor to get a water bottle.

"Are you absolutely certain?" Sam had grumbled under his breath, and Natasha gave him a _look_. She didn't answer, though, so Sam took her down as a no.

Natasha and Steve occupied him for the rest of the next day, surprisingly with Hawke- Clint, as an add-on, hanging around only for Natasha, but being a really nice guy about it. They sparred, played video games, and messed with each other the entire day, and Sam honestly kinda liked getting to know the other "normal" human on the team, or at least the only other guy without superpowers. They did a nice job distracting him, and he barely thought of his worries until Clint asked if he could come with them the next time they visited Peter, to "see what this homeless kid was all about".

Sam said yes, of course. Honestly, who would say no? It's not like Hawkeye was rude or offensive, and Peter seemed to have handled Steve and Natasha well enough. Sam had even learned his name! That was nice to know.

And then another day passed without event, except for his morning jog past the bench, which Steve, Natasha, and Clint accompanied him for. Still, there was no luck, and Sam spent the rest of the day out with the three of them, desperately trying to distract himself from his building worry. There was no way to know if Peter was okay, he realized. His little friend could be dying in an alley right now and he wouldn't even know.

That night, it was hard to sleep. His mind kept running over all the dangers of being homeless and alone in New York, and how easy it would be for Peter to fall prey to such dangers. He knew Peter was capable, and he'd gone longer than this without seeing the kid, but that didn't mean that Sam couldn't be worried now.

He woke up late the next morning because of it, and sighed, resigned, as he clambered down the stairs. There were only four flights of stairs between his level and the Rec Floor, so he only took the elevator on mornings when he was feeling especially sluggish. He was slightly regretting his decision, though, as he started on the last flight of stairs between him and the Rec Floor.

Bruce, Darcy, Clint, Steve and Natasha were all gathered around the counter the Avengers ate around, eating what looked like muffins, but you could never really be sure with this bunch. Clint was the first to notice him, and scooted over to make more room for Sam to sit on the stool between him and Darcy, as Natasha and him were crouched over a smart phone with Steve, probably showing him another internet video or something.

Sam sat down and snagged a blueberry muffin out of the box in the center of the counter, peeling back the wrapper and taking a small bite off the top.

Whatever Natasha and Clint were showing Steve ended with the larger blonde man making a disgusted sound and setting down his mostly-eaten muffin with finality, clearly not intending to eat the rest of it. Clint snagged it by the wrapper and pulled it towards himself, openly snickering at Steve's disgusted expression.

"Pretty funny, right?" Clint asked, pulling a piece off of Steve's muffin and popping it into his mouth.

"The future is revolting," Steve murmured, setting his head down on the counter.

"The hell'd you show him?" Sam wondered, looking back and forth between the two superspies.

"You don't want to know," Steve groaned, before peeling his head up off the counter and looking towards him. "So, we going to check on Peter today?"

Sam shook his head, his heavy resignation returning back to him. "Nah, I woke up too late. The kid only hangs around the bench when he's sleeping, or just about to be. I don't know where he goes during the day, but I've never been able to spot him around New York when he wasn't on the bench."

"Wouldn't hurt to check," Natasha said, and shrugged when they all looked over at her. "Well, it didn't seem like the kid really had the best sleep schedule, and last time we saw him he was falling asleep at ten, looking like he'd been up all night. The very least it'll do is calm your worries a little, Wilson. I can feel your concern from all the way over here."

"I'm coming!" Clint exclaimed, snagging the last muffin from the table. "You guys normally bring him food, right?" He paused. "Hold on, I should probably switch out my hearing aid, this one's comfortable, but it doesn't work the best."

"Don't bother," Natasha said, pushing up from her stool and setting her hand on her hip. "He's mute, remember? No hearing necessary."

By now, Steve had stood up too, and Sam stared up at all three of them, squinting. "So, just like that? We're going. I don't get a say?"

"You know you want to," Steve said, giving him a facial expression that was something between a sincere smile and a smirk. Sam glowered at him for a few seconds before pushing up from the table, bringing his muffin along with him.

"Wow, this kid's gotta be something," Darcy said from where she was still sitting, drinking from a fancy wine glass full of orange juice.

"Don't tell me you're coming," Sam teased, and she stuck her tongue out at him.

"Ru~ude," she complained, taking a dainty sip from the wine glass. "Nah, I've only got five more minutes from breakfast before I have to shove a muffin down Jane's throat, so I'm booked. Bruce is gonna help me!"

"I'm really not," Bruce said calmly, not even bothering to look up from his book. Darcy huffed and crossed her arms, her elbow coming dangerously close to knocking the fancy wine glass off the counter. Sam winced, but calmed down when there was no smashing sound. He considered asking why she was drinking out of a wine glass when it was obvious there were several normal clean glasses available, but he was fairly certain the answer would be something like "because I can", so he kept his mouth shut.

Steve gently tugged him to the elevator, and when he stepped in, Natasha punched the button for the bottom floor. Sam stared at the

lit elevator button for a few moments, and then tensed. "What- right now? I'm still in my pajamas!"

Natasha hummed, a smile flickering on her red-painted lips. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

Considering the fact that Sam was wearing soft pants with little Thor's Hammers on them, he found that hard to believe. Steve muffled a chuckle, while Clint openly snorted.

"Oh, shut up," Sam glowered, crossing his arms over his chest. "I got them on sale, it was a set."

"Yeah, they sell 'em pretty cheap in sets of six," Natasha chimed "innocently". "They have all of the Avengers, actually. Hey, look on the bright side, you'll probably be able to wear your own brand Falcon pajama pants pretty soon!"

"Am I supposed to ask how you know that, or just assume it's one of your hidden superpowers that you don't tell us about?" Sam asked dully, disregarding her second statement completely. She smiled at him with one side of her mouth but didn't answer beyond that. Sam kinda wanted to wring her neck, but also knew she'd probably kill him if he even bothered to think about trying.

The elevator dinged lightly, and the doors slid open to reveal an already bustling lobby. Sam shook his head resolutely. "Nuh-uh, no way am I getting out of this elevator dressed like this."

Natasha grabbed his arm and proceeded to make him do just that. Clint and Steve followed complacently, not doing anything to help Sam at all, but both concealing smiles of amusement. Sam vowed he'd get back at both of them for it. He would have gotten back at Natasha too, except he knew she'd probably get him back for that about ten times over, and it just wasn't worth it.

Sam stumbled along with them for a while longer, being dragged determinedly by Natasha, until they rounded the first corner and Sam saw that he probably wasn't getting back to change any time soon. It took him a moment before he regained his own feet, and then continued trudging beside Steve and pretending he didn't notice the weird looks they were receiving from passer-by. Whether the looks were because of Sam's getup or the fact that they were all Avengers, he wasn't sure. Maybe both?

It didn't take too long to reach the park, but it took longer than Sam would've liked. It just felt like they were wasting time, he guessed. Like they should sprint there, before it was too late, but it was /already/ too late, so what was the point? Causing a public spectacle, maybe?

It seemed like there were too many thoughts and worries floating around in his head, stuffed so full it was causing pressure on his skull. His head was pounding. He was starting to understand why Zeus took an axe to his head in that one myth.

Well, until they actually reached the bench. Then all of his thought processes screeched to a halt, because Peter was /there/. Asleep, of course, he was hardly anything else on the bench. But, past nine thirty in the morning?

Well, Sam supposed being homeless might cause a slight disruption in your sleep schedule. And nine thirty wasn't that preposterous to people who didn't get up at six every day to jog. Huh.

"Is that him?" Clint asked, turning to Natasha first. She nodded, and then looked over her shoulder to give Sam a smug smile. That's it, it was official; Natasha had hidden superpowers.

Steve stepped forward and knelt down next to the bench slightly, reaching one hand up to shake Peter's shoulder gently. Sam had a weird kind of revelation when looking at how damn small Peter looked next to Steve. God, he really was just a kid.

Well, maybe the "just" didn't quite fit. Living homeless for any amount of time was no small accomplishment, and it had to age somebody mentally a few years. Still, Sam felt an almost instinctual urge to protect this kid, he was just- augh! One fact Sam knew ever since his first mission in the army was that life was unfair, even to the best of people. /Especially/ to the best of people. He just wanted to try and make life a little less unfair for this kid, but he didn't- didn't know how.

He couldn't very well just pick Peter up off the street and take him back to Avengers Tower, especially because he seemed to be avoiding the CPS for whatever reason that Sam couldn't guess. Of course, there was also very little chance of Peter just following them home. Sure, Sam counted him as friend, but... It was just really complicated. And that wasn't even looking into the heaps and heaps of legal issues.

Peter had woken up, and was now looking at Clint with a confused expression. He looked to Sam for explanation, but his expression only got more confused as he noticed Sam's get up. He then looked around at the circle of adults around him, paused for a moment and then scooted over to the higher part of the bench so somebody could sit down next to him.

Natasha was the first to take the opportunity, sitting down on the other side of the bench and leaving a space for one of the remaining three men. Sam supposed that four people could fit if they all squished, but he didn't think it was a very nice move to squish Natasha, so he sat down on the ground next to Steve, on the higher side of the hill. Clint took the remaining space on the bench, and everybody paused for a moment before Natasha got up and Clint scooted down so she could sit in the middle. Having the only person who was a stranger to Peter in the ground sit the closest to him was maybe not the smoothest move.

They sat in awkward silence for a moment while Peter looked all of them over again, splitting most of his attention between Sam, the one he was most familiar with, and Clint, the least familiar with him, before Clint pressed his lips together and handed over the slightly smushed raspberry muffin he was holding over to Peter.

Peter made a happy face as he was handed the muffin, and then an even happier face as he took a small sample of the raspberry part of the muffin. Okay, so he liked raspberries. Sam made a little note in the back of his mind.

He wasn't entirely sure what to do in this situation, just like the last two times he'd come here. Peter, despite being unable to speak verbally, was actually fairly good at communicating nonverbally through body movement. His facial expressions were iffy, but he was getting better. Something was different with other people around, though. It kinda felt like Peter was more distant, though it was arguable if he had any evidence to actually support this because Peter had just met them the first time and the second time he was mostly asleep.

"This is Clint," he said, maybe a little too fast. His voice sounded more confident than he felt, and he allowed himself to fall into the comfortable rut of humor. "Don't make any bird jokes around him, he's sensitive."

"Look whose talking," Clint shot back in a friendly manner, and the tension in his chest eased just a little bit. It dissolved almost completely though, when Peter (after looking like he was steeling himself a little) put his hands together and made a flapping motion. It was hardly a joke out of context, but that didn't stop Sam from laughing a little and lightly patting his shin in appreciation. That had helped considerably.

"Okay, well, like he said, I'm Clint," Clint said. "And I love bird jokes, for your information, so please keep a quota of at least two bird jokes in each conversation you have with me, or I will be forced to make the bird jokes instead."

"And his jokes are all awful," Natasha cut in, smiling slightly. "So you really don't want that to happen."

"Screw you, my jokes rock," Clint rebuffed, not even blinking an eye. He leaned on Natasha and tilted his head up to look at the sky. "Hold on, let me think of one."

"No, please lord, no," Steve joked, grinning fully.

"Hmm, can't think of any," Clint mused. "I must really duck at this."

Natasha groaned and tilted her head back, before looking over at Peter and whispering in a conspiratorial fashion, "Get ready, one he gets rolling with this there is no stopping him."

"What? I guess you want me to sparrow you all the bird puns, then?"

"That one kinda sucked," Steve commented.

"What you aren't eagle to hear my puns?" Clint asked in a faux-hurt tone. "Well, this is kind of hawkward."

"Stop it," Natasha groaned, though her tone betrayed a certain fondness.

"Well," Sam said, giving Clint a devious look. "Toucan play at this game."

Natasha and Steve groaned in tandem while Clint gave him a delighted look. Peter kicked him lightly, but when Sam looked up he could see

Peter fighting a bright smile off his face. Well, that settled it. More bird puns it was.

"Owl be damned!" Clint shouted, beaming, and then it really was on. Sam found himself enjoying it more than he probably should of, but it was over too soon when Clint managed to make a falcon pun. How was he supposed to ignore a pun using his own superhero name? That just wasn't fair.

"Victory!" Clint yelled, and pumped a fist in the air.

"It's finally over," Steve said in an exaggerated relieved tone, throwing his arms up too. Natasha pumped her fist half-heartedly, checking her phone with her other hand.

"Yay," she said in a mostly flat voice.

Clint leaned over, pushing on her shoulder, and then made an amused expression. "Are you playing Temple Run?"

"Yup," she responded, leaning into Peter to avoid the weight Clint was putting on her. Peter seemed kinda stuck, like he didn't know what to do in this situation. He scooted over a little, pushing himself further up the bench, and leaned away a bit. Sam couldn't help a small chuckle, and Steve joined his laughter.

This was exactly what he wanted at this moment, he realized. The past two and a half months, the past four years, really, had been a clusterfuck of confusion, grief, guilt, and obligation. His life had been at its peak, or at least he'd thought so. He was on the experimental wingpack squad, assisting his country, and had strong friendships with the other three of his teammates. He didn't have the highest rank or the best pay, but he'd been happy. Then the incident had happened, two of his teammates were dead and the other, along with himself, was diagnosed with severe PTSD from witnessing their deaths firsthand. Sam had been taken off the battlefield and sent back home, while the wing program was discontinued with a 'very dangerous' brand, and his only remaining teammate cut all ties with him.

The first year Sam had just moped around, living shallowly off his veteran compensation checks in his shitty apartment, where the sink never quite stopped dripping and the carpet smelled perpetually of cat pee. He had too many violent flashbacks from the day to hold down a job. After just shy of year, though, he was searching through loaves of bread in the supermarket when he overheard some asshole complaining about his veteran step-brother, and how he was a lazy no-good slacker. Sam had snapped, screamed his head off at the douchebag, and been temporarily banned from that particular store. Standing on the pavement outside the store, and image of the two mangled corpses of his past teammates flashed through his head, and he broke. Two weeks later, he put his psychology degree to use by signing up for volunteer work with fellow veterans.

Two years later he'd met Captain America while jogging, and then again at the place where he volunteered. A few days later Captain America showed up at his door with a redhead lady Sam didn't even know the name of then, and extended the offer to fly again. Sam couldn't even remember what he'd been thinking when he'd said yes, but he felt like it had maybe been verging on hysterical. The next

three days were the most exhilarating and terrifying days of his life, all in one. And then Sam had been extended the offer to join the Avengers living at Stark Tower, doing the things that Iron Man did already, but as a team, protecting the world, but mostly New York, from whatever came at them.

Living in a Tower full of strangersâ€"and not just any strangers, strangers with superpowersâ€"had been scary, to say the least. He'd felt out of his element, almost chickened out at least thrice a day, and suddenly being in an unfamiliar city wasn't helping anything. He'd been trying to get to know the area around the Tower when he'd run across Peter, his first friend here outside of Steve. Sam had been floundering and Peter had helped surface him somehow, and between Steve and Natasha and Peter (and Clint) Sam was finally starting to get used to life again, and sitting here all together like this was, just, everything he wanted right now.

And then Peter tensed up, like somebody had suddenly jerked on all of his puppet strings. Clint and Steve stopped messing around, and Natasha looked up from her phone, so that everybody was staring at Peter as he swiveled his head around, eyes jumping from one object to the next. He looked alertâ€"no, he looked panicked.

"What's wrâ€"" Sam started to ask, but then suddenly Peter head snapped forward and his limbs blurred for a moment before Sam heard a gunshot and his head slammed against the concrete.

12. Chapter 12

This was almost too good to be true. Peter half-believed it was, actually. Maybe he was just dreaming all of this up. Sitting on the park bench with four other people who had taken time out of their day to come visit him. He was a little drowsy, but much less so than he'd been the last time he'd seen these three. They'd also handed him a blueberry muffin, which tasted like actual heaven after a few days of going off nothing, and had then proceeded to give him some much-needed human contact after four days of loneliness.

The bird jokes were a little corny, but both parties had seemed like they were having fun with it, so Peter let himself enjoy the mood around the whole thing rather than the actual jokes. He didn't even know who the corny bird man was, besides the obvious 'Sam 4' joke Peter could make to himself. But with him added it felt like Natasha was a little less stiff than times before, which balanced out the whole group. Good for corny bird man. Or Clint, Peter thought it was? The encompassing atmosphere around the whole gathering was light, happy, and really refreshing for Peter after the last few days he'd had. Fighting off thugs and gangs in dark alleys with almost no break tended to darken your whole perspective somewhat, so this brief respite felt like exactly what the doctor ordered.

Or at least it did until Peter's Spider Sense went off like a fire alarm in an erupting volcano. Peter's head snapped up from where he had been watching Sam goof off with Steve while they sat on the ground, turning every which way in hopes of seeing what had triggered it. It was idle, not immediate danger to him, so he assumed it was something like a nearby kid falling into a well or whatever, but there was no one else around. It was just them, no matter which way he looked. Nobody was even above them, about to crash a helicopter or

something. What was going on? Sam and his friends had noticed Peter's tense state, and were staring at him worriedly. Peter was only paying a fraction of attention to them, though, still trying to isolate why his Spider Sense had gone off. Was it the muffin, food poisoning or something? Something the others were holding? He'd learned a while ago that his Spider Sense never malfunctioned unless some supervillain like Doc Ock messed with him or whatever, but he'd only fought normal criminals for the past few days, so that wasn't it. Something was wrong, no doubt about it.

Suddenly, it changed. The danger wasn't idle anymore. Peter didn't hesitate when his instincts screamed at him to duck. He tossed his weight to the side, into Natasha, and hooked his arm around her shoulders before pulling his body down into the fetal position, landing on Sam and bringing him to the ground in the process. There was a somewhat worrying thump as Sam's head thwacked against the sidewalk, but Peter figured it wouldn't be anything worse than a nasty concussion, which was better than being dead. Somewhere in the middle of all of that, Peter heard gunshots ringing out, but didn't even time to brace himself for pain before he felt one graze his arm and another near his shin. One of Sam's friends grunted in pain, though Peter wasn't sure which one it was. He just knew it wasn't Sam, since Peter was currently dog-piled on top of him. He hoped it wasn't anything urgentâ€"or worse, fatal.

A second later, Peter opened his eyes. His face was buried in Sam's shoulder, and one of his knees was jammed into Sam's stomach, which must have knocked the wind out of him. Peter rolled to the side, off of his older friend, and looked at the scene around him.

There were bullet holes littered in the sidewalk in front of the bench, and even a few in the back of the bench itself. There were also a few splatters of blood around the area, though Peter wouldn't be able to tell you whose blood it was just yet. Going from the position of her body, it seemed like Natasha had realized what was going on around the time Peter threw an arm around her, and had made a mad dive to get Steve down to the ground. Steve had scrapes across both of his arms from where he'd hit the concrete roughly after being tackled by Natasha from such an angle, but neither of them looked like they had any bullet holes in them. Clint, howeverâ€"the new friendâ€"was a different story. He'd been the only person not tackled from the bullet spray, and had virtually no warning. His body was bent over in a crumpled position, so Peter assumed he must have started moving soon after Peter had, but his shoulder was dripping blood onto the ground. It didn't look like he'd gotten hit in any vital areas, but Peter knew a bullet to the shoulder wasn't exactly a pleasant experience. Peter felt guilty, but he knew he wouldn't have been able to grab Clint over Natasha's shoulder, so he pushed the guilt back for now.

His Spider Sense started ringing in the idle kind of way again, but this time he knew they had less than a minute to move before each of them would resemble slices of Swiss cheese, and that wasn't even a joke. His shin and arm tingled a little from where bullets had grazed him lightly, but he didn't pay them any mind in favor of grabbing onto each of Sam's forearms and heaving him to his feet. Luckily for Peter, Sam seemed to get the concept as Peter was pulling, and got his feet under him before rushing over to Clint, who had managed to get up off the bench in spite of the now painfully obvious bullet wounds in both his shoulder, which Peter had noticed, and his thigh,

which Peter hadn't.

"Nat, you alright?" Clint called, looking over at the red-haired woman who was busy simultaneously helping up and being helped up to her feet by Steve. She grunted in assent, looking over and adopting a worried expression when she saw the state Clint was in. Inner panic rose in Peter, because even though they weren't making a mess of themselves and screaming like Peter had feared, they weren't running. They needed to move, now!

Unfortunately, he couldn't shout at them, so he settled for lunging for the nearest pair—"Natasha and Steve" and grabbing each of them by the arm, tugging them viciously towards the path that led away from the bench. Thankfully, that seemed to snap all of them out of whatever form of shock had kept them from running like sensible people. Sam supported Clint on the side of the leg that had gotten shot while Steve and Natasha started running with Peter instead of making him pull them along. Peter ran back to Clint's other side and ignored his protests that he was fine without the extra help, pushing everybody faster. Pride would make them slower, and slower would make them dead.

As predicted, the second shower of bullets came down just seconds after they'd managed to get away from the edges of the guns' apparent range. Luckily for them, it seemed that sniper assault rifles or whatever these guns were didn't load very quickly, and were instead built for one round of pure death. On the other hand, if Peter's Spider Sense wasn't so on the dot, they'd probably all be dead right now. Ugh, the thought made Peter's stomach churn. Once again, he was glad for his spider powers.

Though, his spider powers might be the only reason they were all in this situation in the first place, so maybe he wasn't so glad. Honestly, he was almost positive he hadn't done anything to let out the Spiderman secret anywhere in the recent past, so he didn't know if that was why they were being shot at or not. Honestly, when it came to a hail of bullets from an unknown, unseen, enemy, Peter's philosophy was run first, ask questions later. He just hoped the others held something of the same belief. Peter blanched as they reached the bottom of the path, realizing they were at a crossroads that very well might determine whether Sam and his friends made it out of this without a few extra bullet holes.

They could hide in the park, but there would be no running away if the enemy caught them, and Peter didn't know if they'd be able to fight off the enemy or not. They could run into the busy streets and try to lose their enemy in the crowd until they got to a safe place, but if the enemy found out, Peter could be putting innocent people at risk. Their last option was to head straight into the abandoned alleyway across the street and try to lose their enemy in New York's twisting, complicated maze of backstreets and closed areas.

Personally, it was the last option that spoke to Peter the loudest. After over three years of swinging all over this dang city, he was probably at least on the top twenty list of people who knew how to navigate every part New York. This area especially, considering how much time he'd spent around here recently due to the bench and all. However, he wasn't sure how well his companions would be able to keep up with him, and it's not like he was going to leave them behind.

He only spent a second or two thinking this over, but those two

seconds were long enough for Natasha to choose which way to go. Directly across the busy, traffic-ridden street and into a dark alleyway. Couldn't say he was complaining, but he was nervous. Crossing the street was not fun. They were in a desperate situation, so you couldn't blame them for being kinda rude by cutting directly across the street instead of running to a cross point, but that didn't stop the downright murderous glares of the people sitting in the cars they were passing in front of. Peter was genuinely afraid one of them would try to run them over.

They made it to the alleyway, and then Natasha really started running, though Peter was pretty sure she wasn't going to leave all of them behind, thankfully. Steve seemed to be having trouble with his left ankle, favoring it much more than he should, so Peter figured it must have gotten hurt in the bullet spray somehow. Sam seemed to be handling Clint just fine, mostly because Clint was taking the two bullet wounds extremely, almost suspiciously, well. Even so, they really didn't have time to think about that right now, so Peter let go of Clint's side and ran forward to push Steve's arm up to hook around his shoulders, tugging on his wrist until the much taller, more muscular man was leaning on him. It must have looked ridiculous to most people, since Peter was tiny compared to Steve, but if Peter couldn't lift this much weight, what kind of superhero would he be?

Natasha led the way, motioning the direction of each turn she thought they should take. Peter did his best to keep track of where they were in his mental map, but it seemed to him like Natasha was acting less like a guide and more like a beacon so they wouldn't conflict in which way to go every time they came to a fork in the alleyway. It was both useful and resourceful, but Peter kinda thought it would be better if he could point them to one of his safe houses instead of just wandering aimlessly. Natasha was also doing something weird with her hands, and it took Peter a moment to realize that she was texting. Texting who? Who in the world would she be texting right now? Help, he supposed, but who did these guys know who could help in this situation, besides the police? Was Natasha texting 911? Did 911 even accept texts?

Peter was actually genuinely contemplating this, which meant he was nearly blindsided when Natasha inhaled deeply as she back peddled from the corner she'd just looked around and reached into her jean pocket to draw something out. A moment later, a dozen guys in Kevlar vests came around the bend, wielding guns. Natasha pepper sprayed one in the face and kicked another one to the ground ruthlessly before they even had time to aim, and that was enough time for Peter to let go of Steve and sprint towards the guys. They seemed a little surprised at the teenager running towards them, which gave Peter a small amount of hope that maybe it wasn't him they were after. He didn't know why they might be after them otherwise, but he knew for certain that people who annihilated innocent park benches with machine guns were also the type of people who typically worked for supervillains, so these guys were probably somebody he wanted to fight.

So he did.

The first guy he ran at didn't even have his gun ready, so he was nearly powerless as Peter launched himself at him and wrapped his limps around him like a cuddly octopus, leaning forward enough so

that the guy lost his balance and toppled to the ground. Peter rolled up off him and swept the legs out from under the next one before he even knew what hit him. That's where the surprise factor stopped, unfortunately. Their guns were awkwardly large to be fired at such close range, but that didn't mean the next guy had any problem using his as a baseball bat to hit Peter in the stomach. Peter gasped as all the breath was knocked out of his and stumbled back to recover, but another guy grabbed him from behind before he could regain his breath and the guy who'd hit him before came back for another hit. On the third hit, Peter exhaled with a whoosh as the butt of the rifle hit a luckily spot and a crack came from his torso. Peter guessed it was one of his ribs breaking.

He started twisting his hands behind him to get better leverage on the guy holding him, but it was hard to breathe and move when some smirking, sadistic douche kept hitting you in the stomach with his gun. Peter finally managed to twist his hands around so that they were pressed flat into the small of the man holding him's back. He dropped his weight a little so the man's hold loosened, and then swung his body up around the guy so he twirled over his head, breaking his hold on the process. Hoo boy, Peter was lucky he was flexible, or else that would have hurt a lot more than it did.

He kicked the man who had been holding him into the guy who'd broken his rib, hard enough to send them both tumbling to the ground. He turned around, but found there currently weren't any enemies for him to engage.

Natasha had apparently already taken out four while Peter wasn't looking, and working on a fifth. There were the four Peter had taken down, and each of the others had their own guy. Peter was just making his choice on who to help (Clint, because he was the most wounded) when Sam finished off his guy with a nasty blow to the head and ran to help Clint. Peter squinted at the scene in front of him curiously, hesitating slightly as the gears in his head fired into motion. He knew Sam was a veteran from all their conversations, but why did his friends all know how to fight so well?

While he was pondering, Steve finished his guy, and also ran over to help Clint. Apparently nobody thought Natasha needed help. Hell, Peter didn't think Natasha needed help. She seemed to be doing just fine; almost bored, even. However, he didn't want to overwhelm the poor guy left fighting three very muscular, if wounded, men, so he turned back to check if any of the guys he'd taken care of were getting up just in time to get hit in the ribs again. What was with these guys? Why did they hate Peter's ribs? Peter scowled as he pulled the gun away from the guy who'd hit him with it without difficulty and tossed it behind him, leaning back to get momentum enough to throw his weight into the punch he delivered to the man's jaw. The guy crumpled, leaving Peter with a sore hand and throbbing ribs. Jeez, this was probably going to take an unfairly long amount of time to heal, too.

The fighting sounds had ceased behind him. Peter could hear someone coming up behind him, and turned his head to see Sam staring at the man's he'd just sucker-punched. Sam let off a low whistle and clapped Peter on the shoulder. "One hell of a left hook," he remarked, a smile tugging at his lips. His hand slid down Peter's shoulder to grab his arm and tug him along, and Peter fell into step beside him.

There was tension in the air that hadn't been there before, like they were all expecting some more heavily armored and arms men to pop up around any corner. For a moment, Peter worried if the fighting moves he'd pulled had been too advanced. He hadn't really been thinking in the heat of the fight, but he did have a secret identity to keep. They all seemed pretty tame looking back on it, though. He could easily excuse everything except the little flip he'd done as street fighting, but everybody had been caught up in their own fights by then, so he was fairly sure nobody had seen it.

After a moment to let everybody regain their breath, they grouped up again, except this time, instead of going to the front, Natasha jogged over to Clint's side. After adjusting both his and her own arms so that she was supporting his side comfortably, she looked over to where Sam, Peter, and Steve were standing. "Sam, you've got Steve," she ordered, in a tone that made it clear there would be no arguments. "Peter, you take the lead. Just pick any direction, it doesn't matter which. We just don't have time to argue directions. Just make sure there's nobody around the corner, and that the way you choose isn't a dead end." Peter nodded in agreement as Sam hurried over to Steve, and ran up ahead. This way he could lead them to a safe house, so he wasn't exactly complaining. Besides, from the others' perspectives, the arrangement made the most sense. Peter was the smallest of the group, so it must have looked strange at least to see him supporting the largest of the group, even though Steve hadn't actually been leaning on him all that much.

Peter took the first turn without thinking, the others following close behind. It would probably be good to get away from the battle scene just in case one of the men had radioed in their position, which was more than likely. Besides, he hadn't been paying extremely close attention to the turns Natasha had been taking, so he needed to find something familiar to get re-oriented before attempting to lead the group to one of his safe houses.

There was a problem even with that plan, though, Peter realized as he raked the area with his eyes for anything that he would recognize. He may not know where exactly they were in the maze of alleyways, so he didn't know which turns to take just yet, but he knew they had to still be fairly near the park where the bench was. Unfortunately that park was only blocks away from Stark Tower, which meant the area surrounding it was booming real estate. There was nothing but occupied skyscrapers around for nearly a kilometer in radius, and even past that it was a while before there was anything foreclosed or abandoned that Peter could possibly use as a safe house.

As soon as he got oriented, he had two options. One, go for the closest safe house, which was still dreadfully far, mind you. The problem with that safe house was that he wasn't sure they'd even be able to get inside. The small, abandoned storage building had been boarded up very well only a year ago, and the only way inside was through a broken skylight at the top of the building. The only way to access that skylight was if you had the ability to climb up vertical surfaces, and even if Peter helped the others up, he wasn't sure he'd have the finesse to pull it off without his webs. Also, if they got cornered in the building, there was only one way out, and there was nowhere to hide. The other option was farther—much, much farther than the other safe house. /Much/ farther. It had easy access with just a door on the ground, or any one of the several broken windows.

It was large, open, and easy to hide in if the need arose. But, as already mentioned, it was very far from their current position. Peter knew the longer they were out in the open, the more they ran the risk of getting caught again. Which way to choose?

In the end, Peter went with the closer one. They could always hide in the shadows next to it if they couldn't get in, but who knew, maybe they'd be able to break the boards off one of the ground windows if they all worked together? It was kind of a risky gamble, but running for the far one could count as such a gamble as well. If this particular risk didn't pay off, well...In an emergency, Peter made a very good human shield. He was practiced in the art making sure the bullets hit him, and yet, didn't get any of the important areas, like his brain or heart.

The others followed him without complaint, though Peter found forced himself to wait every so often. Uninjured and unburdened, he was just a lot faster than the others. Especially since he had a destination in mind.

Crossing streets was probably the most difficult and nerve-racking part of the whole run. It was slow, complicated, and terrifying all in one go. There was a bigger chance of whoever was chasing them to spot them while crossing the streets, because they were so open, and that didn't even take into account how many New Yorkers they irritated by crossing in front of their cars. Thankfully, nobody got angry enough to try and run them over or anything crazy like that, though some people looked like they wanted to.

Finally, they came to a sudden halt when Peter's Spider Sense triggered just as he was about to peer his head around the next corner. He froze in his position, hearing the others come up behind him, and then took a few careful steps back. His eyes scoured the alleyway in front of them for any hint of danger, but it looked just like any other New York alleyway to him.

Peter crouched down, grabbing a mostly unbroken beer bottle off the ground before carefully standing back up. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Sam and Co. giving him weird looks, but he waved them off. He shifted his grip on the bottle, careful not to cut his hand on the one ragged edge, and gently tossed it into the alleyway before them.

The reaction was instantaneous, and so surprising that Peter flinched back hard and nearly lost his footing. Several muffled gunshots rang out and the mostly unbroken bottle shattered into a couple dozen tiny fragments before it had even made it a foot into the alleyway. Peter saw the others scramble back in surprise as well, though they weren't really what his attention was on.

"Holy _shit_!" Sam cursed in an emphasized whisper. "We could have walked right into that."

"A trap," Natasha muttered, maybe more to herself than anybody else. "It's familiar. There are highly sensitive motion detectors rigged to machine guns on either side of the alley. There're probably also men on call somewhere around here who would be alerted if anything set off the trap." She looked over to the group, her expression focusing in determinedly. "If we don't move, now, we're going to be in trouble."

"Too late," Steve grunted, and Peter turned his head around to see that Steve was looking down the alley they were currently in, at a group of heavily armored men who were pouring around the corner. Oh boy.

"They're going to try and herd us towards the trap," Natasha informed, turning around to face Clint head on while she jogged backwards down the alley. "Get as far from it as possible!"

There was something a little weird about how she was saying her words, like she was enunciating them a little too much. The fact that she'd been staring at Clint while speaking instead of facing forward was a little weird too, but right now wasn't exactly the time to question something like that. Peter was too busy worrying about the dozens of armored men coming straight for them.

Thankfully, none of them were armed with guns, which meant that Peter didn't need to worry about getting shot along with making sure that nobody got pushed into the trap that lay at the end of the alleyway. Some of them did have tasers, but on terms of what Peter could deal with, tasers were much higher than bullet wounds. Peter could, and had, get tasered once or twice and then get right back up and keep going. Bullet wounds were harder to get over.

Unfortunately, there did seem to be the occasional projectile that rained down from the end of the alleyway, but it seemed to be only one shooter, and they were preserving their ammo. Peter didn't know what was being shot, exactly, but he knew it wasn't bullets because bullets wouldn't be treated so reverently. Something to worry about later, when he wasn't being attacked by several armored men with tasers.

There was a small symbol on each of the men's arms, he noticed, as he sidestepped one of them. A tiny octopus, a symbol Peter could have sworn he'd seen in his history text books from high school. The symbol for the Hydra organization, the one that had had such a large hand in World War II. The very same one Captain America had taken down, right? Wasn't Hydra done and gone? It would be so incredibly unfair to poor Captain America if he woke up in the future and Hydra was still active.

Peter dodged the current man who he was fighting's swing, and reached out to grab his elbow, flipping around to throw him into another charging guy. He gained a brief respite from fighting and looked around to see how the others were fairing. Turns out, a lot better than expected. Sam was kicking butt easily, which Peter thought made sense because he was a veteran of the army. He had to be a butt kicker; it was part of the job description. Natasha seemed to have gained hold of two tasers and was ruthlessly using them on anybody who came within range, which resulted in most of the men wearing very hesitant looks as they approached her. Steve was holding his own just fine, using a piece of the armor the men were wearing like both a shield and a weapon in the same breath, blocking attacks and battering the men easily.

The real surprise was Clint. Not that Peter had assumed he wasn't capable, but two bullet wounds weren't exactly easy to work around or fight with, and Peter knew this from experience. Clint was managing fine anyway, using a strategy similar to Peter's, which involved

using their own numbers against them by shoving anybody who attacked him back into the crowd, oftentimes resulting in an almost comical topple of men. It was oddly reminiscent of bowling pins, or at least to Peter.

As he evaded another attack easily, it occurred to Peter how strange it was that these four people he was tightly alongside were doing so well in the fight. Or, how well they had taken being shot at. Or how well they handled the injuries, or the navigation of the alleyways, or the former attack. They didn't even really seem all that shocked at being shot at. Evidently, Peter was missing something. Probably something obvious, and he was just being a dummy and stupidly overlooking something. Right now really wasn't the time to be thinking it over, but he could acknowledge that there was something he was missing about Sam and his friends. He'd have to think it over later, in detail. Preferably when they were somewhere safe.

Another man swung clumsily at Peter, and Peter used his smaller physique to his advantage by ducking down and away so the man stumbled forwards and hit one of the other men who had been coming up behind Peter. The advantage to having this many guys all crammed into the alleyway was that Peter was easily able to duck and dodge through them while they had troubles avoiding collision with each other. His flexibility and reflexes weren't exactly detrimental either. Steve, Clint, and Sam seemed to be having issues maneuvering, but with the unconscious bodies of men piling up on the ground movement was slowly becoming easier and easier, as long as you could watch your step.

Natasha was a one woman army. She would run at the man closest to her and head directly for the open patch of skin on his neck, tasering him all the way down to the ground before moving onto the next target. Clint had basically built up a fortress of fallen men around him, and it looked like he had also gotten a hold of a taser, so he was fine. Steve had upgraded himself to two pieces of armor as shields, and was using one to bash the enemies unconscious while easily fending off attacks with the other. Sam had slowly worked his way closer to Peter and seemed to be taking on most of the men headed towards the smaller teen, as if protecting him. Peter was simultaneously annoyed and flattered.

Unfortunately, no matter how good the others were, five against fifty wasn't very good odds. Nobody had gotten out of the fight unscathed. Steve's limp and gotten worse and his shirt was torn and stained red on the right side. Natasha had a nasty-looking head wound and was favoring her left arm. Clint had already been badly wounded, but he seemed to have avoided getting hit the best, though his leg looked much worse. Sam had received a dislocated shoulder, from the looks of it, as well as a split lip and what looked like the beginning of a nasty black eye.

Peter hadn't been able to entirely avoid injury either. He'd gotten tasered once, though he'd been able to recover from that rather quickly, due to all the practice he'd had in his early days of Spiderman. He'd missed something in his first assessment: the fact that around a quarter of the men had small knives concealed, which had earned Peter a nasty cut across his forehead that was dripping blood into his eyes. They'd also gone for his ribs like mad when they'd realized he was already injured there, which meant that his ribs were even worse off than before. Great. Still, it was impressive

that five unarmed people had managed to take down so many armored, armed men. Peter was proud of the others. As soon as this was over, a pat on the back for everybody.

Peter's Spider Sense went off again, just in time for him to step to the side as something colorful whizzed past his face. Dang, that power was coming in handy! Peter officially loved his Spider Sense.

One of the men fighting Natasha yelped in pain and toppled to the ground before Natasha even got him with one of the tasers. There was a small, feathered dart sticking out of his shoulder, which, from Peter's experience at least, either meant poison or tranquilizer. Peter wasn't sure which this particular situation was, but either would be bad, so it was probably in his best interest to avoid the darts.

Steve used his armor plates as shields, basically like he'd been doing before, but now he was fending off darts. Clint and Natasha each used the fallen men as shields of some sort, while Peter's Spider Sense earned its keep several times over. The few remaining enemy men dropped like flies, evidencing that whoever was shooting the darts didn't care whether or not those men got shot or not.

Sam was the only one left uncovered. Just as Peter was heading towards his friend to assist in this matter, his Spider Sense went off, but in an idle sort of way. The way it did when it was warning Peter about somebody about to get hurt that wasn't Peter. He sprinted for Sam, knowing what was about to come next.

Peter tackled Sam to the ground clumsily, throwing the older man off balance and sending them both tumbling. He angled his body away from the incoming dart, but wasn't able to completely dodge it. He felt a sharp pain in his shoulder as the dart dug in, and realized that the end was probably barbed so it would be hard to get out.

While they were both on the ground, they were momentarily immobile, and the shooter took full advantage of this. In this position, though, Peter was unintentionally shielding almost all of Sam's body with his own. That meant that within the next few seconds, just as he was trying to shove to his feet, Peter ended up with three more darts buried in his back. His fast metabolism might have been able to fight off one dose, but four was far too much. Peter barely managed to stumble to his feet while swaying like a drunken sailor before blindly groping out Sam's arm for balance. When his searching hand didn't find anything, he staggered two steps forward before his knees gave out and his whole world turned to darkness.

13. Chapter 13

Peter woke up feeling comfortable, which was really the only warning he needed that something wasn't right. He wasn't even really awake so much as still asleep, but becoming aware of his surroundings. Well, until that particular realization made him struggle violently for consciousness.

He kept his eyes closed, listening carefully for any sounds that could give him a hint of where he was or if there was anybody else in the room. The room was almost silent, but Peter could hear the faint

sounds of New York traffic, as if from far away. Other than that, nothing. Peter carefully cracked open an eye.

"And then immediately closed it again, feeling his face scrunch up a little in reaction. That had been a lot brighter than he had thought it would be. He'd been expecting dim sunlight, if that. Not a bright light right above him. Ouch.

After a moment of lying there, feeling like an idiot, Peter carefully slid his eyes open again. He could barely see anything through his very squinty eyes, but his excuse to himself was that he was getting accustomed to the light. This was only partially true, since squinting wouldn't help as much as simply opening his eyes and waiting a few moments, but Peter didn't want to do that because he knew it would suck.

He felt almost woozy, though that wasn't exactly the right word. It's like there a thin fog floating around in his head, just enough to make him feel oddly disoriented. Everything felt strangely unreal, like he was lucid dreaming. Misty and odd.

He finally bucked up and just opened his eyes, looking around as much as he could without moving his head at all. He didn't see anyone out of the corners of his eyes, so he swiveled his neck around to see more of the room. He still didn't see anyone, so he concluded that he was probably alone in the room, at least for now.

The room itself was unfamiliar, but that wasn't much of a surprise. The walls were painted a soft blue, with a white ceiling above him. There were four circular lights implanted in the ceiling, one of which was directly above him, shining almost painfully bright. It looked like there was a bookshelf across the room, but there wasn't a single thing on it, besides maybe dust. Going from the basic look and feel, he was laying in some sort of bedroom, albeit a rather empty one.

Peter shifted his arms back and tried to lift his body upright, but quickly discovered that that particular task wouldn't be nearly as easy as he'd thought when bolts of pain raced up from his ribs. Peter groaned and fell back, laying there for a moment while waiting for the pain in his ribs to go fade a little.

After a few seconds of recovering from his surprise and pain, he got his arms levered underneath him and pushed up again. This time, he was expecting the pain and powered through it, biting his lip as his body curled in on itself. He managed to swing his legs around over the side of the bed so he could leverage his calves against said side of the bed to pull himself upright easier.

Once upright, he leaned over onto his legs for a moment. He was sure that at least one of his ribs had to be broken, if not more, going from how much it hurt. Maybe he was just being kind of a baby, but it hurt a lot more than he remembered, so it couldn't be just one.

Peter looked up around the room again, but wasn't surprised by anything he saw. Like he'd first concluded, he seemed to be in an empty bedroom. The dark blue carpet was surprisingly soft beneath his feet, and he wriggled his toes a little while taking in his surroundings. The bed he was sitting on matched the color scheme of

the rest of the room perfectly, with soft blue and white sheets. It was pressed up against the wall on one side, but open on the other three. There was a bookshelf pressed against the wall near the end of the bed, and what looked like a wardrobe in the opposing corner. The door was in the corner across from the wardrobe, shut firmly, though Peter didn't know if it was locked or not. There was also a window on the same wall as the bookshelf, though the view it provided was obscured by white curtains.

Overall, a nice room. Way too nice for a prisoner, so Peter was about ready to rule that possibility out, but not until he checked the door. Looked like the Hydra goons, or whoever they had been, probably hadn't gotten him after he'd passed out, which was good. That didn't really explain why he was in an empty bedroom, though. The only other people there had been Sam and his friends. Had they taken him to one of their homes?

Peter stumbled to his feet, ignoring the painful complaining of his ribs, and made his way over to the window. It may have just been a futile hope, but maybe he'd be able to see something he recognized, to get his bearings just in case he suddenly had to escape. When he pushed the curtains aside, though...he was much higher than he had first thought. He could see the tops of other skyscrapers from his vantage point; he was actually higher than a few of them. He'd seen the view a thousand times, but it never got less beautiful.

The sky was dark and kinda smoggy, like it always was. The moon was still visible, almost full but not quite there yet. The skyscrapers all around him were lit up halfway, causing a kind of starry picture to replace the one blocked out by the smog cloud that hovered above the city. Peter was in love with this view, which was good, because he saw it a lot.

After a moment, he stepped away from the window, leaving the curtains wide open. The window looked like it would open easily enough, but Peter would be hard pressed to escape this way if he was in a hurry. He could always climb down the side of the building, of course, but he'd have to be careful to get a strong grip because he had no webs to save him if he started falling. If he was being chased, escaping out the window would be a no-go unless he had plenty of space between him and his pursuer.

Peter glanced around the room once more, not seeing anything out of the ordinary, or anything that he hadn't seen before. He looked down at himself, and noticed that he wasn't wearing clothing familiar to him. He had on a soft black t-shirt that was several sizes too big, and some pajama pants. Captain America pajama pants. They were too big for him as well, but somebody had used a hair tie to bunch up the waistband and make sure they didn't fall down.

He caught the hem of the shirt and pulled up upward, catching a glimpse of the clean white bandages wrapped tightly around his ribs. There wasn't a speck of blood on them, which was rather encouraging, and told Peter that the bandages were more to make sure his ribs healed properly than to actually bandage a wound or anything. They also explained why it had been so hard to sit up originally. The bandages had been wrapped to keep his torso straight, so bending over would probably be fairly difficult.

One thing he wasn't wearing: his Spiderman suit. He had been wearing

it before, though, when the attack had happened. They would have taken off his jacket, hoodie, and t-shirt to bandage his ribs, which meant whoever had played doctor probably knew his secret. Oh, goodie. He wouldn't even be able to excuse his way out of this one by pretending to be a mega-fan or whatever, because he'd need his voice to do that. Only thing left to do was find out if they were going to tell anyone.

Peter dropped the hem of the shirt, letting it fall back into place, before wandering towards the door. He reached for the doorknob carefully, gently grabbing it and turning it as silently as he could. He waited for it to stop suddenly after about a centimeter, signifying that it had been locked from the outside, but it never did. The door opened smoothly, with barely a squeak, and Peter peeked his head out.

He was treated to a view that made him pause for a moment, drinking in the sight that lay before him. In front of him stretched a large, comfortable looking living room. The carpet was the same color as it was in the room he'd just woken up in, and very soft on his bare feet. There was a couch and two loveseats arranged around a silver and glass coffee table, which in turn lay in front of a sleek flat screen television. All very impressive, but not the most impressive thing in the room.

The feature of the living room that had really made him pause were the windows. Large, floor-to-ceiling panels that wrapped all the way around two sides of the room, revealing the New York skyline much better than the little window in the room behind him. Almost as nicely as sitting on the edge of a skyscraper did. It was definitely impressive.

Peter didn't see anybody else in the living room. Going by the color of the sky outside, it was pretty late, so that made sense. Anybody else was probably asleep. He looked around the room again in awe, and maybe a little confusion. Who even lived here? This apartment was large enough to take up at least half a floor, if not more. Whoever lived here had to be filthy rich, or the tenant of whatever building this was. Or both.

After looking around a little more, Peter padded over to the door next to the one he'd come out of and gently set his hand on the knob. Just like before, he opened the door carefully, peeking his head in as if he was expecting to see something horrific on the other side. Nope. Just a bathroom. A big, fancy bathroom, yeah, but just a bathroom nonetheless. Peter wondered if he'd be able to take a shower before he was kicked out. He couldn't remember the last time he'd showered.

He stepped into the bathroom, leaving the door wide open behind him for light instead of flipping the lights in bathroom on, and stepped up to the sink. There was a half-used bar of white soap on a small dish near the faucet. A bottle of liquid soap sat innocently on the other side, claiming to be watermelon-cucumber scented. Peter turned the water on, wetting his hands before reaching for the liquid soap. His hands felt too grimy to touch anything in the fancy place until he washed them. He was afraid he might get something important and expensive dirty. Maybe irrational, but it had been a while since he'd washed his hands, and even longer since he'd done it with actual soap.

When he finished he turned the water off, keeping his hands near the sink basin and lightly fanning them around to dry them. He could see a neatly folded hand towel hanging from a ring just right of the sink, but he'd rather not use it because he didn't know what he was supposed to do with it afterwards. Was he supposed to put it back? Was he supposed to leave it in a laundry bin? What was the hand towel etiquette of this place?

His eyes flickered up, meeting the reflected image of themselves in the bathroom mirror as he continued to limply shake his hands back and forth. He looked pale, gaunt, tired. Way too thin, almost sickly. Weird, considering that he actually felt pretty good right now, in comparison to the past few months.

There was a long cut just above his eyebrow, long enough that it bridged about half of his forehead. It had a long gooey strip pasted over it, kinda like somebody had used weird tape to try and fix the cut. Peter didn't know as much about medical protocol as he probably should, but he knew cuts like this normally got stitched up. Of course, with his healing factor working at full capacity, which it almost certainly wasn't right now, stitching would be more of a hassle than a help unless you had no other option. Whoever had bandaged his ribs and found out about the Spiderman thing had probably taken care of the head cut too, and had come to the same conclusion about his healing factor.

His hands were as dry as they were going to get by just shaking them, so Peter stepped out of the bathroom. He closed the door behind him just as gently as he had opened it, and wandered slowly towards the next door. Like times before, he opened it gently, barely peeking his head in, except this time, it seemed justified. The room that lay within was another bedroom from what he could tell, except far less empty than the one Peter had woken up in. The sound a faint snoring could be heard from within, and Peter stepped back and very carefully closed the door, making as little noise as possible.

Okay, so what he knew was that Peter, Sam, and his friends had been attacked for reasons yet unknown by some organization that was either an evil Nazi organization, or wanted to be. He'd been taken down mid-fight by a couple of tranquilizers, but judging from the lack of a prison cell or locked door, said evil organization probably hadn't captured him. Which meant he was probably with either Sam, Natasha, Steve, or Clint. He would guess Natasha, since she seemed to be the most likely to be filthy rich out of all of them, but the main color theme of this floor seemed to be blue. Maybe he was just being presumptuous, but blue really didn't seem like Natasha's color.

Peter started wandering around again. The bedroom with somebody else in it was at a corner; the corner opposing was the windows. Peter went back to the bedroom he'd woken up in, and then ventured a tad further. Once he'd walked around a thick wall, he found an open archway into the next room, which was, to his delight, a kitchen.

Peter stepped into the kitchen, which had windows much like the living room, but they stopped just above the edge of the counters. There was a large circular island in the center of the kitchen, with a few stool chairs placed around it on one side, seeming to serve as

replacement for a dining room table. Around that, there was plenty of space to walk and move around.

He paused for a moment, and then make a break for the fridge. Maybe he was getting predictable, but he was hungry, dammit. He may as well see if there was anything that didn't look marked so he could grab something. If he had assumed right, and he was with Sam or one of his friends, they couldn't really mind that much, could they? If he was wrong, and was with whatever organization had been after them, it would be good to get his strength up just in case he needed to escape.

The fridge was halfway empty, which was kinda weird, and gave evidence to the fact that this floor didn't seem very lived in. There was a gallon of milk and several half-full boxes of fruit, as well as some cheese, deli meat, and various vegetables when he looked through the crisper drawers. There were eggs and butter, too, but all of this only took up like two shelves if it were piled all together, instead of fairly spread out. As it was, the absence of other food made the fridge look rather empty. Peter shut the fridge and looked at the freezer portion for a minute, before passing it up.

There was a basket of fruit on one of the counters, and Peter grabbed an apple from it, moving the other fruit around a little so the apple's disappearance was less noticeable, just in case. He considered sitting on one of the stool chairs near the island counter, before shaking his head to himself and sliding down to the floor, scooting backwards to lean against one of the counters while he ate.

Maybe it was just his hungry stomach speaking, but the apple was amazing. Peter didn't get very much fruit while living homeless, because it was all stale hot dogs and water. He wasn't complaining about the food he'd managed to get his hands on, of course, but eating an apple was nice. He liked how juicy it felt, though maybe that was kind of weird. Not to mention the flavor. He just... really enjoyed eating the apple.

Peter spent a minute or two making out with the apple before he finished and had to throw the core away. He lifted himself to his feet using the counter he'd just been leaning on, suppressing a hiss at the pain from his ribs. He found a tiny trash can hidden behind one of the lower cabinet doors, and tossed the apple core in, wiping his slightly sticky hands on his shirt while pretending that he wasn't. Then, he quietly shut the cabinet door again, and turned around to reassess the kitchen, just in case.

His gaze caught on the microwave, or, more specifically, the microwave clock. 2:36, the glowing electronic numbers read. A.M., going by the absence of the sun outside. Peter frowned, feeling slightly tired all of sudden, even though he'd just woken up. It certainly would hurt to get some more sleep, but he wanted to explore a little further. Get more acquainted with this place, just in case. He was doing a lot of things just in case right now, but it probably doesn't hurt to be careful while alone in an unfamiliar place.

He left the kitchen behind him, wandering around the living room again. There were more doors around the living room border, including an elevator door, which Peter wasn't going to even bother trying yet. He started peeking in the rooms behind the doors as delicately as

he'd done with the bathroom and other bedroom, but found no trace of another person besides the one in the second bedroom. He did find another bathroom and bedroom, along with an empty room that looked like it could be used as a bedroom, without any furniture, but none of them had any personal belongings in them like books or toothbrushes, giving off a strange 'unlived in' vibe.

The last door he tried, he couldn't open. Well, he probably could, actually, if he put his back into it, but that's not what he meant. He meant it was locked, but not with a physical lock, with a keypad touchscreen thingy that looked, quite frankly, really advanced. Peter couldn't claim he wasn't curious, especially considering that the dimensions of the room made it around the size of a walk-in closet, but he wasn't going to break anything just yet. He'd been snooping as it was; it was probably a little unfair to break into a room so clearly locked.

Peter wandered back to the room he'd woken up in, stepping in and lightly shutting the door behind him. It was the only room in the entire apartment suite with its lights turned on, so once again Peter found himself squinting against the brightness. He groped along the wall until finding a light switch, except after his fingers met the familiar smooth surface of the wall, the familiarity ended. Peter looked over, frowning, and was met with the sight of an advanced light switch, which, from what he could tell, had both brightness and color controls, which, what? Peter squinted angrily at the light switch for a little while longer before reaching over and dialing the brightness all the way down. The lights turned off, so he took it as a success.

Peter collapsed in a very dramatic fashion on the bed once he'd gotten over to it, and then regretted immediately after as his ribs complained loudly. He grabbed one of the pillows and moaned into it, also rather dramatically, before flipping himself over with minimal rib movement and shoving the pillow under his head. The blanket was a little harder, since he was laying on top of it, but he got it eventually. It was just the top one, mind you, but Peter's ribs hurt and he wasn't getting back up again, so he'd have to settle.

The bed was nice and cozy, if not a little too squishy, and Peter had no problem getting comfortable on it. The blanket was more than he'd had for a while, and the pillow was much better than his old jacket had been. And yet, Peter found himself staring at a wall, not even close to falling asleep.

This was understandable, he supposed. Unfamiliar place, unfamiliar situation. He was completely in the dark to what was going to come next, especially with the high chance that his secret was out, or about to be out. His anxieties and worries were flitting around his head like butterflies, absolutely refusing to be swatted. Honestly, his situation was all the more reason to get more sleep, since being well rested for whatever was going to happen next would probably be a good thing, but he just couldn't get his mind to settle. So he rolled out of bed.

He brought the blanket with him, because he liked the blanket and appreciated the blanket and wanted the blanket to be his friend. It wrapped around him like a cloak, billowing too much around his bare feet, but he wasn't so much cold as just needing comfort, so that didn't really matter. He strolled over to his bedroom window, leaning

on the sill and staring out at the small fraction of New York skyline he could see. The large windows outside the room would probably be better suited for his moping, but Peter didn't really feel like venturing out of this room right now, for whatever reason.

The New York skyline was always strangely comforting to him. Maybe it was some poetic thing, like how it only underwent little changes, but mostly stayed the same, and that was comforting. Or that looking down on it you knew there were millions of people down there, each with a life as complicated to them as yours was to you, and your problems always seemed a bit smaller when you thought like that. Maybe it was just because it was really pretty to look at. Peter wasn't sure, but he always liked looking at the skyline, especially from all the crazy vantage points he could get access to that nobody else could. He had the skyline memorized from nearly every angle in New York, which was actually very helpful when navigating.

Like right now, he could see the Empire State Building over there, which was a major landmark. If he looked closely enough, he could see the gap in building that meant various parks, including Central Park. If he really tried, he could identify which streets and avenues were which, using the correct landmarks. Like, going by the Empire State Building and Avengers Tower, Park Avenue would be right...

Where was Avengers Tower? Seriously, Peter wasn't kidding. Going by location to the Empire State Building and how much traffic was clogged up on it, even at this time of night, Park Avenue was that street right there, which meant that Stark Tower should be somewhere close. Peter might just be on the wrong side of the building, but he didn't remember seeing it at all when he was standing awestruck by the view in the living room.

Frowning, he opened the door and wandered back into the living room, staring out the large bay windows in search of the familiar landmark. To no avail, it seemed, because Peter couldn't find it. That didn't make any sense. He should be able to spot it from one of the two perspectives, unless it was around on the kitchen's side right next to them like a jerk.

Peter padded into the kitchen, paying no mind to the temperature change between the living room carpet and kitchen hardwood. He peered out the kitchen windows, blanket fluttering around him, but he didn't see it. He frowned to himself, walking back closer to the bay windows, and peering down, a little to the side.

Park. Avenue. Right there. Using Park Avenue he should be able to find Broadway sooner or later. The two streets came to a kind of point, and if you looked left of there a little you'd come to the base of Avengers Tower. Dang, this was starting to frustrate him!

Peter found Broadway eventually, after getting a little lost. He normally found Broadway using Avengers Tower, not the other way around, so you couldn't blame him too much. He traced the street line with his eyes until it abruptly stopped, right around Park Avenue but not quite. He bridged the rest of the gap with his mind, and then traced an imaginary line all the wayâ€”

No. He'd already established the Avengers Tower wasn't close by and just hiding like a jerk, so unless he was standing in Avengers

Towerâ€"

Wooww~ Peter was supposed to be the top of his class. This was honestly just pathetic. Had it really just taken him ten whole minutes to determine that Avengers Tower was missing from the horizon because he was /standing in it/! Peter slapped his palm against his forehead, rocking forward on his heels and suffering in how idiotic a mistake that was. At least ten whole minutes, if not more, of his life wasted, because he was a total idiot. Wow Parker, some good navigational skills you've got right there! Ten outta ten.

Once Peter stopped pouting about how much of an idiot he was, the shock hit him. After the events of the Battle of New York, Stark Tower had been rebuilt and renamed into Avengers Tower. They'd taken advantage of the partial repairs necessary to turn the top twenty floors over to the Avengers headquarters. They'd moved a lot of the Stark Industries workplaces into another building, also clearing out the bottom floors so that Avengers Tower was designed a little more like a tourist attraction, and so that the middle and lower floors of Avengers Tower had become more of an extremely advanced HQ for the R&D department of Stark Industries. It worked out great because with the high security of Avengers Tower, people had an even harder time stealing Stark Industries' blueprints.

That meant, though, exactly sixâ€"or, seven, including Wingmanâ€" people lived in Avengers Tower, and those seven people were the Avengers. Peter was an /idiot/. He'd recognized them. On the roof, and Black Widow and Captain America were familiar for some strange reason. Oh ho, I wonder why! Augh, he was such a dingus.

Well, at least that explained the lack of Spiderman recognition and subsequent targeting. Even if Hydra or whoever had been after them had actually been after Spiderman, which he was almost sure wasn't actually the case, and had just gotten a general location, the goons in the alleyway probably would have been able to identify him pretty easily. Like, even if they only narrowed it down to somebody sitting on that bench, it was pretty clear who Spiderman was. Peter wasn't exactly a big, really muscular guy. He had lean muscle, yeah, and that's all he ever needed, but he wasn't all biceps and triceps and stuff like the other three guys. Natasha was also eliminated from the possibility because of her rather obvious curves. If they had really been after Spiderman every single guy in that alleyway would have gone directly for Peter after about ten seconds.

So, they'd definitely been after the Avengers. After the Avengers' heads, apparently. Or maybe not quite to that extreme yet, but close. Peter got the feeling that whatever organization that it had been was feeling a little desperate. With the defenses on Avengers Tower and how well each of them worked together as a team, they probably had reason to. That organization, possibly Hydra, had just been feeling like it needed to get rid of a few of the Avengers before it could scoop in on the rest, which would be easier targets if mourning. Taking on the whole the Avengers in full battle mode would be absolutely flipping terrifying, so they'd attempted to take a cheap shot. It had a good chance of succeeding if the person they'd been visiting was a regular homeless teenager, but poor Hydra had the misfortune of Sam befriending the one homeless teenager that could sense danger before it happened. Hydra's heads' were probably still spinning from that.

So they'd gotten away, then. And Peter was guessing he was on one of the Avenger's personal floors. Safe. Probably as safe as he could get in New York nowadays, actually, unless he wanted to lock himself up in a private panic bunker for the rest of his life.

Exhaustion flooded him when he realized this. It wasn't an unfamiliar sensation, considering he'd been feeling it almost constantly for the past four months, but this time, he had a bed nearby. A comfortable, safe bed. Where he could sleep for hours without being woken up by the sound of a car horn battle or somebody screaming obscenities at something else.

Peter turned around and walked back into the bedroom he'd woken up in. He curled up on the comfy bed, pulling the blanket he had taken with him around his body while he tucked his other arm underneath the pillow. He curled up his legs like he always did to brace them against the armrest to keep himself from sliding down the bench while sleeping, before stopping himself and smiling into the darkness, extending his legs fully and making a little humming sound when they didn't even reach the end of the bed. How nice.

There were going to be a lot of things to worry about when he woke up. His identity had been revealed to the Avengers. Sam and his friends were the Avengers. Thor and Hulk hadn't met him yet and that would need to be sorted out. And there was probably going to be a giant mess of everything that he hadn't foreseen as well. But right now, despite everything, he was content.

14. Chapter 14

Sam had been internally screaming basically this entire time. Externally, he was a bit more restrained, and had managed to keep a cool, calm façade while handling the situation with the grace and stability of a trained army veteran. He was proud of himself for that. But deep down, in his true heart of hearts, Sam was freaking the fuck out.

Now that the entire thing was over and done with, he was still processing the events over again, this time with a lot more shock. During it all, Sam had reacted on instinct and training without thinking much beyond his and his friends' survival. Little odd details hadn't really meant much to him in the moment, but now that he had time to think it over, certain things were sticking out to him.

The main thing that stuck out was, naturally, the strange way Peter had reacted to the attack. Sure, it wasn't the strangest thing to imagine that anybody homeless would find violence against them nothing out of the ordinary, but Sam didn't think snipers were included in that package. Even if they were, there was something else bothering him, and from the minuscule expressions Natasha had shown, he wasn't the only one who had noticed.

There was something... off, with the way Peter had reacted. Almost like he knew what was about to happen before it had. It seemed far beyond the realm of normal human intuition, but maybe Sam was just underselling it. He'd have to talk with the other three later, to see what they thought about it. Because... augh, Sam wasn't exactly sure, but it really /had/ seemed like Peter'd known what was about to

happen. Due to his time spent on the battlefield, Sam was more than aware of the phenomenon of human intuition, but did it really go this far? He'd have to inquire with Clint, Steve, and Nat later, to see if he was just blowing things out of proportion, but first he wanted to sort through some of his thoughts himself.

Currently, he was sitting in the back of one of Stark's more discreet, yet larger cars. Peter had laid down on the seat next to him with his head cradled in Sam's lap, out cold, while Natasha, Clint, and Steve sat across from them. Stark's driver, Happy or something, was navigating the streets of New York from up front, while Stark and Thor flew above the car on the route back to the Tower. Natasha had been one step ahead of the rest of them, and had texted the other Avengers for help while she'd still been in the front.

Thinking about it now, it was actually really fortunate that that small group of men had attacked them before they got to the alley trap, so that they changed around their positions to make sure poor Peter wasn't crushed under Steve's arm. Sam was a little haunted with the idea of what would have happened if Natasha had been first when they'd come across that setup. With the way she'd positioned them, at least all of them wouldn't have walked into it at once, but if anybody else had been in the lead...

Sam didn't really want to think about that. Though, it was yet another testament for some kind of precognition or _something_ going on with Peter.

The car pulled into the parking garage underneath Stark tower, parking in one of the spots reserved for Tony (and Pepper's) cars. Tony had informed the Avengers that they could all park there too, but since none of them except for Tony had cars, none of them had taken advantage of it yet. Happy, the driver, shut down the car and started to get out, and the three Avengers sitting across from him mobilized as well. Steve leaned forward to scoop Peter up once he was out, but Sam waved him off, scooting to the side to open the nearest door.

Once the other three had piled out, Sam shimmied out from underneath Peter to get out of the car, and then leaned back in to pick up the teenager, since he obviously wasn't in any position to walk himself. Sam blinked when he finally hoisted Peter up in his arms without any support from the car, because the younger boy was surprisingly light. Then Sam's heart dropped, because that was to be expected, he supposed. How much did you get to eat when homeless? Couldn't be very much.

Sam exhaled heavily and pushed the thought out of his mind as he turned and strode towards the elevator up from the lower levels. The other four were already standing near it, and it was slightly uncomfortable when they all had to wait for it. Clint was leaning heavily on Natasha for support, while Steve had shored up against a wall. Happy was silent, but kept sending their injuries worried glances.

Finally, the elevator arrived, and all five of them stepped in. There was a slightly awkward moment when Peter's foot caught on Happy's shoulder, but the chauffeur/bodyguard paid no heed, carefully fixing the issue and giving Sam a kind smile. Sam's appreciation for the man

rose two notches, especially when he remained respectfully silent the entire elevator ride up, because Sam knew that all of them were basically radiating "don't ask, don't tell" vibes.

Finally, after what seemed like way too long an elevator ride, the elevator dinged open on the Avenger's recreational floor. Sam was expecting to be greeted with the slightly anxious faces of Thor, Tony, Bruce, and probably Darcy and Jane. Maybe Pepper, if their timing was convenient, though that was less likely when you observed how busy the poor woman's schedule could get. And he was partially right, because everybody except Pepper was there, and they all did look a little anxious, but in front of them was a woman Sam had never seen before.

She had long brown hair tucked up in a messy bun, wearing a pair of nice jeans and a green tank top, with a jacket over that. She was a bit shorter than average, though Sam couldn't say her exact height right away, and was wildly pacing in front of the Avengers, wringing her hands anxiously. When the elevator dinged, her head snapped up and over, looking at them for a second before acquiring a determined look and turning around, marching over to something on the couch.

Sam looked over to Steve, Natasha, and Clint, to see if he was the only one who didn't know this woman or...? But Steve looked just as lost as he felt, and Clint was squinting suspiciously at the woman. Natasha, however, had gained a look that looked remarkably... relieved? She nodded respectfully in the strange woman's direction, even though now her back was turned, and said, "I'm glad Tony's not so much an idiot that he thought this situation could go without a doctor."

"Hey!" Tony protested, crossing his arms and giving Natasha a mocking face.

"Miss Rushman," the strange woman spoke up, turning around holding what appeared to be an overly large medical kit, so large that she seemed to struggle a bit to lift it. "Or, Romanov, I suppose. Nice to make your acquaintance again. You wouldn't mind laying that gentlemen out on this couch, would you?" She gestures to Clint, and then continued. "The kid can go..." she wheeled around, looking for another vacant couch, but Natasha interrupted at that point.

"He probably got an overdose on an unknown tranquilizer," Natasha informed the stranger. "Putting him on a more permanent surface might be good right now, since he probably won't be waking up for a while."

The woman crouched over the first aid kit and pulled out a strange device that looked a little like the thing diabetics used to test their blood sugar. "Well, in that case," the woman said, striding over to Sam and Peter. "I'm going to want to take a blood toxicity reading to make sure the overdose isn't going to kill him, and depending on whether or not it will, I'll either treat him first or last."

It hadn't even occurred to Sam that that many tranquilizers could probably be really dangerous, but it really should have. He held as still as possible while the woman took the blood test, and while she was doing so, Clint nudged Natasha lightly and asked, "Okay, but who

is she?"

"Veronica Edwards, Tony Stark's personal Medical Doctor. The arc reactor causes a lot of health problems, so it's better to just have one doctor who knows how to handle all of that instead of just going to any random doctor whenever there's a problem." Natasha replied. "I only met her once as Natalie because this one," she sent Tony a dirty look. "Was busy trying to hide the fact that he was dying of palladium poisoning, which is generally something doctors worry about. As I understand it, she also works with Stark Tower employees, when they get hurt, but Tony's top priority. Busy job."

"Personal Avengers Doctor, now," Tony pitched in, looking smug. Veronica let off a little nervous half-laugh as she finished up getting the blood sample, and then turned her back to do something with something in the medical kit.

"Hopefully you won't need me too much," she said, fiddling around with something. "But if there is a problem, don't hesitate to call, no matter what. I'd rather be woken up at three in the morning for something little, than to learn that one of you was hospitalized because you didn't want to call me."

"Will do," Steve reassured her, stepping forward and holding out a hand. "Nice to meet you Doctor Edwards."

"Ditto," she replied, shaking his hand lightly before holding up the blood test sheepishly. "He's probably going to be out for a while, but it doesn't look like the tranquilizers were concentrated enough for an overdose."

Sam breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness," he exhaled, before he even realized he was speaking. Natasha brushed her fingers across his arm reassuringly.

Dr. Edwards clapped her hands together and looked at Peter, humming quietly. "Well, like I said, the tranquilizers won't do more than keep him out for a night, so I'd say put him on a bed where I can check him over after I finish with you three." She pointed a finger at Clint, and gestured sharply to the couch she'd pointed at earlier. "You first."

Sam decided, after a little bit of internal debate, that he would just take Peter up to his floor and lay him down in one of the spare bedrooms. There was nothing on his floor he wanted to hide, so he'd have no problem having Veronica come up there afterwards to check on Peter. He headed for the elevator just as Clint practically collapsed on the couch, and closed his eyes as he leaned the back of his head against the elevator wall, feeling relief. Peter was going to be just fine. They were all going to be just fine.

Sam supposed it was a little dumb that he'd never asked Tony if he had a doctor for the Avengers or not. He knew SHIELD had had a medical plan for the original six, but SHIELD wasn't around anymore. He knew Bruce was a doctor, but so was Tony, if they were thinking in just proper titles. Bruce had treated illness and injuries before, but that wasn't exactly the same as dealing with the problems the Avengers were probably going to have in the future, fighting giant blobs of acid goo and giant robots and stuff. Would Dr. Edwards even be up for it?

Sam exited the elevator onto his floor, and carried Peter into the guest bedroom next to the Master Bedroom. He set him down on the sheets, feeling a pang of worry when the kid didn't so much as twitch. Tranquilizers did that, of course, but it was still a little unsettling. After a moment more of looking at the kid's painfully thin, pale form after laying him down, Sam turned his back. He still felt a little bit uneasy, even after leaving the room, so he glanced up at the ceiling.

"Uhm, Jarvis?" Sam addressed the ceiling with a question. Talking to the AI was still a little uncomfortable, just because he liked seeing where everybody was in a room, and not seeing the person he was talking to made him feel a bit paranoid.

"Yes, Mr. Wilson?" the smooth, accented voice of Jarvis replied to him.

"Justâ€“, uh, warn me if he wakes up, okay?"

"Of course, Mr. Wilson," Jarvis replied. "Anything else?"

"No," Sam shook his head, though the action wasn't necessary. "But, thanks."

"No thanks necessary, Mr. Wilson," Jarvis responded, always so proper. Sam nodded, paused for just one more moment, and then strode towards the elevator.

When he got back downstairs, Dr. Edwards was already almost done with Clint, and moving on to Steve. Somebody had turned on music, probably Tony, and now Darcy, Clint, and Tony were all passionately singing the lyrics. Veronica seemed to be humming along, and the same with Jane. Everybody else on the floor seemed to just be enjoying the strangely jovial atmosphere.

Sam paused at the door, suddenly feeling extremely out of place, but Natasha was having none of that. When she spotted him she grabbed his arm and hauled him over to where she was sitting, pulling him right down next to her. She was playing Temple Run on her phone and, softly, almost inaudibly, humming to the song. Sam sat there for another few moments, before relaxing a little, feeling a smile tug at his lips.

Just after the song had ended, on the verges of a new one, while Dr. Edwards was still looking over Steve, Bruce cleared his throat. "If it's not too much of an intrusion, Dr. Edwards," he started. "If you'd like, I can go up and check on P... Peter?" he guessed, sending a questioning look to Natasha to see if he'd gotten the name right. She nodded, and his facial expression relaxed a little. "I'm not an experienced medical doctor, but I'm not completely unfamiliar with stuff like this. If it would save you time..."

Dr. Edwards looked up at him, and bit her lip, seemingly going over the query in her head before smiling and nodding at Bruce, giving him the go ahead. Bruce nodded back, and made his way over to the elevator, leaning against the railing just as the door closed. Sam looked at the reflective, smooth surface of the elevator door for a moment after he left before turning his attention back to the group.

As Dr. Edwards worked her way over, through the four Avengers who had been there, Sam became more relaxed, even sang a few songs with them, if he knew all the words. It seemed like they were all going to be just fine, and they'd all survived a Hydra attack that must have taken a lot of resources. The mood grew even lighter when Tony had mentioned he'd sent some of the NYPD to pick up all of the stray Hydra agents, meaning Hydra'd lost at least fifty, in not more, men today. That was no small victory, especially not if they could send Nat in later to question some of them, in which they'd probably get the location of a base. This desperate move, on Hydra's part, could open up a string of domino-like reactions to allow the Avengers to capture several of Hydra's bases. If they played their cards right, this could lead to another desperate move from Hydra, which could open up even more opportunities.

After finally finishing up treating Natasha's small and few wounds, having gotten to all three men before her, Dr. Edwards nodded at the room, and headed for the elevator herself. Sam thought of offering to come with her, but he couldn't think of anything that he could help with that Bruce wouldn't be able to do as well. Also, she probably didn't want him hovering over her shoulder while she treated Peter, so he stayed silent as she left the floor. The other three Avengers he'd been with earlier seemed to be congregating on one of the couches, and Sam moved over to there as well, sensing a discussion about to happen.

Natasha was the first to break the ice, plunging right in. "We would probably be dead if it wasn't for him," she spoke bluntly, gesturing with her head over to the elevator. "I'm not complaining about that fact, but I am up for investigating it. Did none of us notice something obvious?"

"There couldn't have been a sign," Steve replied, shaking his head a little. "The sniper nest was on a skyscraper. Any glint would have just been assumed as a window flash. Besides, Peter's back was to the sniper. Sam or I would have been more likely to notice anything wrong, but I didn't see anything the entire time." He turned to look at Sam. "You?"

Sam shook his head. "Nothing."

"There's something else that's kinda bothering me," Clint said. "The second encounter, it was too chaotic and packed to keep track of, so I can't speak there, but the first encounter..." he shook his head, brow furrowing. Sam saw just the faintest hint of pain flicker across his face before it was gone, and assumed Clint's injuries had probably panged with the simple action. He felt sympathy rise within him.

Clint pursed his lips, and sent a quick glance around the circle. His hand brushed his side, where Sam was pretty sure one of the bullet holes was. He seemed to zone out for a minute, probably thinking, and then shook his head again. "Never mind," he said, in a voice that sounded hollow and unconvincing. "It's nothing."

Natasha's eyes narrowed. "Clintâ€"

"Never. Mind," he repeated, in a much more forceful, convincing tone. "I was making something out of nothing." Clint tilted his head,

getting a little bit of a smile back on his face, but it didn't look completely natural. "In fact, I bet we're all doing that. The kid's probably completely normal." He made brief eye contact with Sam, before doing the same with Steve. "You guys can't deny, with how close that attack came? It kinda scrambles your brain a little. We're all just looking for an explanation, wherever we can find it. We'll probably come up with a more plausible explanation tomorrow, once we're a little distanced." He grinned widely at all of them. "As for the rest of today, I just want to relax, watch a movie or something..."

Natasha was giving Clint a hard-to-define look, but her expression seemingly evaporated half a second after Sam looked at her. She gave a small smile, and lifted to her feet. "As long as it's not Robin Hood."

"Fuck you, that's a classic!" Clint exclaimed, but his tone was light and jokey. Sam exhaled, feeling the high tension in his shoulders drain away. Steve looked like he was similarly relaxed. After a moment more, Sam relaxed back even more onto the couch, watching his two friends bicker about movies. Clint was probably right. After a good night's sleep, things would probably seem different.

They'd finally chosen a movie and had just settled down on the couch to watch when the elevator dinged. Sam turned his head, in sync with the others watching the movie, just in time to see Dr. Edwards step out of the elevator, followed shortly by Bruce. Sam's eyes narrowed a little when the landed on the later, because though the man was always a tad shy and skittish around, well, everybody, this seemed different. He looked almost... paranoid? At the very least, nervous. Had Dr. Edwards said something to make him feel uncomfortable?

"The kid'll be fine," Dr. Edwards announced, smiling shyly at the floor and wringing her hands a bit. Sam couldn't really imagine the woman being rude to Bruce, so perhaps that wasn't it. "He has a nasty few broken ribs, so you should be careful about that, but other than those he should heal up without any problems. Seems the tranquilizers aren't going to do much more than keep him out for too long." She looked around the room. "Unless there's anything else, I'll be going now."

"Nope, nothing else," Tony chirped cheerfully, grinning at her. "Thank you, Veronica. I'll call you if anything new happens."

"Be sure you do," she replied happily, and stepped back into the elevator. Bruce ventured further onto the floor, eyes darting over to the group Sam was in for a moment, frowning, before he headed over to where Tony was sitting. There was something in his expression, though... Sam wondered what that was all about.

Soon, though, Clint jostled him back into enjoyment of the movie, and the amicability of the atmosphere and such. Sam let the thoughts of suspicion slip from his mind, at least temporarily, as he went back to watching the movie. He could think about this stuff later, right?

Every chapter after this one is my work. I just wanted to post the full story so people don't get confused.. I'm so excited to start this!

MarvelSpiderMan

15. Chapter 15

Hey everyone! This is my first chapter for "Reintroducing Hope", I hope you all like it!

PETER'S POV:

Peter cracked open his eyes, shutting them quickly again as a bright light met his eyes. Everything felt fuzzy to him. He cracked his eyes open again, and was able to see a little better with the bright light. Then he remembered. Everything that's happened in the past couple of hours flooded Peter's brain. He slowly propped himself up on an elbow, hissing in pain slightly as his ribs protested. He wasn't able to get a good look at the room that he woke up in last night until now. The room was huge! The room looked like it had the basic necessities in it from what Peter could see, but for him this place was a dream come true. He managed to sit up without causing his ribs too much pain, and he looked around himself. Then it hit him.

"_The Avengers. They know who I am... they found my suit..." _Peter thought, looking down at the bed.

What was he going to do? More importantly, what were the Avengers planning on doing to him? Peter sighed.

"_Great. Now what am I going to do?" _Peter thought, running a hand through his hair.

So Sam, Clint, Natasha, and Steve were Avengers. Peter nervously looked at the door, almost as if he expected someone to come through it. What would happen to him now? They obviously all knew that Peter was Spider-Man... but what were they planning to do with him? Turn him in to the police? Peter somehow doubted that. Sam was his friend. He knew that deep down, the man cared about him a little. He brought him food while Peter was on the park bench... so why would he turn around and hand him over to the cops? Unless he had a thing against Spider-Man. Peter sat back against the bed headboard, still looking at the door.

"_What am I going to do?"_ Peter thought.

AVENGER'S POV:

It was around nine o'clock in the morning when Sam walked into the Avenger's main floor. He walked off the elevator, and was welcomed by the smell of fresh coffee. He walked into the kitchen and saw Thor, Tony, Bruce, Natasha, Steve, and Clint either sitting at the granite counter top, or sitting in the living room.

"Morning, Sam." Steve greeted, seeing his friend.

"Morning." Sam answered, walking into the kitchen to get a cup of coffee.

"Did you check on the kid?" Clint asked from the counter.

Sam glanced at him, then finished poring his coffee.

"No... I didn't. But... there was something that I wanted to talk to you guys about." Sam said, turning around, cup in hand, and leaned against the counter.

"About what?" Steve asked, looking at his friend.

Sam sighed slightly.

"About yesterday... the whole Hydra thing... it seemed like the kid almost knew that they were going to attack us." Sam said, unsure.

"Do you think that he works for Hydra? He could have been told to lure us to the trap." Natasha said.

Sam shook his head.

"No. Peter's not like that. He seems like a good kid." Sam said.

"But what other explanation is there?" Clint asked.

Sam sighed.

"I don't know." He said.

Everyone was silent for a moment.

"What happened again?" Tony asked, sitting in a chair across from the kitchen.

Sam sighed.

"We were attacked by Hydra goons..." Clint said.

Tony nodded.

"Yes, I know that. I'm talking about the kid. What happened with him during the attack?" Tony asked.

Natasha turned in her bar stool at the counter.

"Well... he acted like he's been in a situation like that before. He was alert, and he acted prepared in case anything happened..." Natasha said.

Tony nodded slightly.

"But something did happen... the Hydra goons attacked you guys." Tony said, folding his arms over his chest, and looking like he was thinking about something.

"What are you getting at?" Clint asked.

Tony stood up, and rubbed his chin in thought.

"If the kid acted like that... maybe he's connected to something... Hydra maybe. Sam, where did you first meet the kid again?" Tony

asked.

"I first met him on my morning run in the park... Tony. He's a good kid." Sam said seriously.

Tony nodded.

"But what if it's a cover up for Hydra? They could have set you up from the moment you met the kid." Tony said.

Sam shook his head.

"Tony. I think that I could tell if that were the case. But it's not." Sam said.

Tony sighed slightly.

"But what else could it be?" He said.

Everyone was silent for a moment.

"Did you happen to catch his last name?" Tony asked.

Sam shook his head.

"No. He just told me that his name was Peter." Sam said, putting his mug on the counter behind him.

Tony nodded, and sighed.

"Well... I have an idea about how we can find out who this kid is... but its not going to be easy." Tony said.

Everyone looked at Tony.

"What do you mean?" Steve asked, confused.

"We are going to do things the old fashioned way." Tony said.

"And what would that be?" Natasha asked.

"We're going to try to look him up on social media." Tony said.

Natasha raised an eyebrow.

"How are we going to do that? Do you know how many Peters there are in New York?" Clint asked.

Tony nodded.

"True... but with the help of Jarvis, we can be done in an hour or so." Tony said.

Steve raised an eyebrow.

"But how are we going to know which one of those people are him?" Steve asked, confused.

Tony looked at him, then looked at everyone.

"Two words. Facial. Recognition." Tony said with a grin.

Sam raised an eyebrow.

"Wait. You took a picture of him?" Sam asked.

Tony nodded.

"Yeah... safety precaution." Tony said.

"How did you take it?" Clint asked.

"Well, before I went to bed last night, I had Jarvis turn on the security cameras in his room and the rest of Sam's floor." Tony said.

Sam looked over at Tony.

"Why?" Sam asked, sounding a little mad.

Tony held his arms up in defense.

"I did it, just to be safe. I mean, come on. We don't even know anything about him. I did it so in case something happened, we have video evidence." Tony said.

Sam sighed, and looked like he was about to say something to Tony, but Tony interrupted him.

"Anyway... it's a good thing that I did. I got a clear picture of him, so Jarvis can scan it and search the internet database for him. But another thing is bugging me about him." Tony said.

"What's that?" Steve asked, raising an eyebrow slightly.

"Well, after I looked at the video feed from last night, it appears that he got out of bed and was walking around a little." Tony said.

Sam raised an eyebrow.

"But he was heavily drugged... and not to mention his injuries that he got from the fight." Sam said.

Tony nodded.

"I got him on video." Tony said.

Sam's brows furrowed in confusion, and he looked down at the floor in thought.

"But how?" Clint asked.

Tony shrugged.

"I have no idea, but we can worry about that later. We need to find out who he is first." Tony said, taking out his cell phone from his pocket.

Clint nodded.

"I'm going to go to my lab to figure out who he is... anyone want to help?" Tony asked.

"I will." Natasha said, getting off of the bar stool.

"I guess I will too." Clint said, following Natasha.

Tony looked at Sam.

"Sure. I'll help." Sam said, looking at Tony.

Tony nodded slightly. Sam picked his coffee mug up, and brought it over to the sink.

"I'll meet you guys in the lab." Sam said, looking up at Tony.

"Sure thing." Tony said, turning around, walking towards the elevator, followed by Natasha and Clint.

Once they were gone, Sam sighed.

"You don't think the kid is bad... do you?" Sam asked Steve, leaning against the sink.

Steve stood up from the chair that he was sitting in, and looked at Sam.

"No. I don't think so. Like you said, you would have known if something was off about him. The same goes for me. He's just a kid who is living in unfortunate circumstances right now." Steve said.

Sam nodded.

"But what you've been doing for him is great." Steve said, with a slight smile.

Sam looked at him, and nodded.

"I hope so. I have seen him sitting there in that park all alone for months now... I knew that I had to do something." Sam said.

Steve nodded.

"I'm glad that you did help him... and now, we can possibly help him even more if we find out more about him." Steve said.

Sam nodded.

"You're right. Let's hope that Stark finds out something." Sam said, walking over to the elevator.

"You going to help them?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, I'm just going to check on the kid first before I head up to the lab." Sam said.

Steve nodded.

"Sure. See you later." Steve said.

Sam nodded. He got into the elevator, and was headed up to his floor.

PETER'S POV:

Peter had laid back down, and fell asleep again. He wanted to walk out of the room and explore a little bit more, but he wasn't sure if anyone was around. He was currently half asleep, but he heard a soft knock on the door to the room that he was in. His body tensed up a little.

"_Uh oh..." _Peter thought, becoming uneasy.

He stayed in the position that he was in, his body turned on his left side with his head on a pillow. He heard the door open slowly, and heard a few footsteps come into the room. Who was it? Were they here for him? Many frantic thoughts raced through Peter's mind as the footsteps got closer to him.

"_I just have to pretend that I'm asleep... maybe they'll go away." _Peter thought to himself, trying to ease his nerves.

He felt a hand go on his shoulder, making Peter flinch.

"_Sorry." _The person apologized.

Peter opened his eyes, and turned his head to see that it was just Sam. Peter inwardly sighed with relief.

"Sorry I startled you there, Peter." Sam apologized.

Peter nodded, and gave him a light smile, trying to let him know that it was alright.

"You feeling better?" Sam asked.

Peter nodded.

"That's good..." Sam said, slightly awkward.

Peter noticed something was off about Sam.

"_Crap. He definitely knows about me being Spider-Man..." _Peter thought, biting his lower lip slightly.

"I bet that you feel a little sore after what happened yesterday, and I thought that you would like to freshen up a little. I brought you some stuff that you can use. Please feel free to use whatever you want." Sam said with a smile, walking to the door.

Peter nodded, and smiled slightly.

Sam was about to leave the room, but he turned around.

"I left you some stuff in the bathroom, so feel free to take a shower if you want to ." Sam said with a kind smile.

Peter would have been extremely embarrassed for someone to say that to him, but he knew that Sam was saying it in a nice way. Peter nodded slightly with a smile.

"Alright. Well, you can come up to the main floor when you're done if you'd like for some breakfast." Sam said, with a smile.

Peter nodded. Sam turned, and shut the door behind him as he left. Peter sighed.

"_He's a nice guy..." _Peter thought, thankful that someone was actually treating him like a human being.

Out on the streets, people give no respect to homeless people. Especially teenagers. They must have thought that they were no good, and they wanted to steal things for a living. Peter carefully sat up, and pulled the covers off of himself. He got off of the bed, and walked over to the window. It looked like it was around the early morning, based off how the sky was a golden color mixed with light blues and pinks. It was a beautiful sight how the early morning sun shinned on the buildings. Peter rarely got to see sights like this anymore after he couldn't use his web shooters anymore. Peter sighed.

"_I wish that everything could go back to the way things were before..." _Peter sadly thought, looking out the window.

He turned away from the window, and headed to the door. He slowly opened it, and poked his head out. He cautiously stepped out of the room, and walked down the hallway towards the bathroom. He walked inside, and turned on the lights. His mouth fell open, and he looked around the bathroom in awe. It was the biggest bathroom that he has ever been in, and it was a beautiful sight for Peter. The walls were made out of granite, and the floor was made with white tiles, the cabinets were a rich cream color, and the sink was also made out of granite. Peter shut the door behind himself, and sighed.

"_Now I feel horrible about cleaning myself in here... this place is so clean that I'm afraid to dirty it up." _Peter thought with a frown.

But that's what bathrooms were for, right? Peter shrugged to himself. He saw on the the sink that there was a fresh pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt for him. He had no idea where his clothes had gone, but he assumed that they had been thrown away because of the condition that they were in. Peter bit his lip.

"_I wonder where my suit is..."_ Peter thought nervously.

He walked over to the shower and reached out for the handle but he stopped. It just didn't feel right for him to dirty up this expensive bathroom. Peter sighed. He really needed a shower after everything that he's been through. It wasn't everyday that Peter was able to wash himself while living on the streets. He tried his best though. Peter sighed, and turned on the water.

"_What other choice do I have?"_ Peter thought, as he began to change out of the clothes that he had on.

AVENGER'S POV:

After Sam left the room where Peter was, he headed up to the lab where the rest of the team was. Before Sam stepped off of the elevator, he looked up at the ceiling.

"Hey, Jarvis?" Sam said.

"_What can I do for you, Mr. Wilson?" _The A.I. responded.

"When Peter comes into the elevator from my floor, can you please take him up to the main floor?" Sam asked.

"_Yes, sir." _Jarvis responded.

"Thanks." Sam said, stepping out of the elevator. When he walked out, he saw his team mates all in the lab. They were now currently standing around holographic screens, trying to find out who Peter really was.

"Alrighty... Jarvis, scan the picture and search the internet for a Peter." Tony said.

"_Yes, sir." _ The A.I. responded.

Tony sighed, and crossed his arms over his chest. Information was being scrambled on the holographic screen in front of him.

"It shouldn't be long now." Tony said, turning to look at his teammates.

"What if he isn't on any social media websites?" Natasha asked, looking away from the holographic display.

Tony sighed.

"Then we will have to see if he's ever been mentioned by other people... see if he isn't in any photos with other people that we can identify. If that's the case then we might have to go door to door asking about him." Tony said.

Sam raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"Yeah... and that wouldn't take very long." Clint said sarcastically.

There was a beeping noise from the holographic display.

"_I found a match, sir." _Jarvis said.

Everyone looked over at the large holograph screen.

"_His name is Peter Parker. Age sixteen." _ Jarvis said.

There was a few pictures that popped up in the corner of the screen, followed by several pages of information about Peter. Tony tapped on the group of pictures, and they instantly opened. There were pictures of Peter from his high school, a few pictures of him and his friends, and a few pictures of him and his family.

Everyone was speechless. The kid that was in their tower didn't look

like the kid in the pictures anymore. The one in the pictures was smiling, and so full of life. Peter now looked sad, pale, and lifeless almost. Everyone was silent, as Tony flipped through the photos of Peter.

"What happened to him... his life?" Clint asked seriously.

Tony sighed, and stepped back from the screen.

"I don't know... but we're going to find out." Tony said.

Sam sighed.

"I knew that there had to be a reason behind him being all alone on the streets." Sam said.

Tony looked at him, then back at the holographic screen and nodded slightly.

"Jarvis, find out about his family members... any recent accidents, arrests, or deaths." Tony said.

"_Yes, sir." _The A.I. said.

A moment passed in silence until Jarvis spoke again.

"_Mr. Parker's parents died when he turned six years old. They were both scientists for Oscorp. He was sent to live with his aunt and uncle, May and Ben Parker. Two years ago, Ben Parker was shot and killed by a robber. Five months ago, May Parker suffered from a heart attack, the state deemed her an unfit guardian, and Mr. Parker was sent into foster care." _Jarvis said.

Tony looked down at the floor. No one spoke. Steve sighed.

"So he's been alone all this time?" Steve said.

Sam looked at him, then at the holographic screen with Peter's picture on it.

"I guess so." Sam sadly said.

"Poor kid..." Clint said.

Tony looked up at the screen again.

"What about foster care?" Tony asked Jarvis.

"_There are records of Mr. Parker being taken in by two families, but the last one reports that he ran away." _Jarvis said.

Sam sighed.

"It's probably because he didn't want to be with them... he missed his family." Sam said.

Tony nodded.

"Yeah... that could have been the case." Tony said.

"What about his school?" Steve asked.

"_The school was notified about the incident, but Mr. Parker hasn't been in school for four months._" Jarvis said.

"Get his school records for me, Jarvis." Tony said.

"Why do you need those?" Clint asked, raising an eyebrow.

Tony shrugged.

"I'm just curious. His parents worked for Oscorp... who knows what type of grades he was making." Tony said.

A file popped up on the holographic screen, and Tony pressed on it.

"Hmm... let's see here..." Tony mumbled, swiping through the information.

Everyone looked at him with a slight amount of curiosity.

"Wow." Tony said, shocked by something.

Everyone looked at each other, then back at Tony.

"Wow what?" Sam asked.

"Wow... this kid is pretty smart." Tony said, grinning as he looked through the file.

"What makes you say that?" Natasha asked.

Tony stepped back from the screen, and leaned against a lab table.

"Before this all happened, he was the top of his class... not only his class, but almost the entire school." Tony said.

"Really?" Clint asked, slightly shocked.

"Yeah. His grades are phenomenal... his test scores, his SHSAT scores... they're all excellent... especially in the science and mathematics area." Tony said, looking at the holographic screen.

"Who knew." Natasha said.

"No kidding... you could never tell that about him." Clint said.

Sam sighed.

"But the important thing is, what are we going to do about him?" Sam asked.

Tony sighed.

"We might have to call the Child Protective Services." Steve said, with a hint of sadness in his voice.

"No. Let's give him some time here. He needs to be able to relax without being thrown into child care again." Tony said.

"But, Tony. It's the best thing to do for him." Steve said.

"Yes, but I've heard that some kids are thrown into the system and they never come out the same." Tony said seriously.

Steve sighed.

"It's better than him living on the streets like he has been." Steve said.

Tony sighed.

"True, but he's here now. Let's worry about it later." Tony said.

Steve sighed, and nodded.

"But what's up with him not talking?" Clint asked.

Tony looked at Sam.

"Well... I'm not really sure. I've always thought that he was shy or he had a health condition with his vocal chords." Sam said.

"Hmm... Jarvis, does he have any speech health problems on record?" Tony asked.

"None that I can see, sir. Maybe it is caused by depression, or the lack of use?" _Jarvis suggested.

Tony nodded.

"Could be." Tony said.

"I wonder if he would talk for one of us." Tony said, looking at his team mates.

"Who knows... but it's worth a try." Sam said.

As they were talking, the elevator doors opened, and Bruce stepped out.

"Sup, Brucie." Tony said looking at him with a grin.

Bruce smiled slightly.

"What are you all up to?" Bruce asked, not use to seeing all of his team mates in the lab.

"Well, we're all trying to find out some info on Peter, whose real name is Peter Parker." Tony said.

Bruce raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"The...kids that's on Sam's floor?" Bruce asked, slightly nervous.

Tony nodded.

"That's the one." Tony said.

Bruce nodded slightly. Tony looked at him, and could tell something was off.

"What's wrong?" Tony asked him, seeing him look at the picture of Peter on the holographic screen.

Bruce looked at him, then at everyone. He sighed.

"There's something that you all don't know about him." Bruce said, taking off his glasses.

Tony raised an eyebrow, and looked at everyone.

"What don't we know?" Sam asked, turning around to look at Bruce.

Bruce sighed.

"When I took a blood sample from him yesterday, I found something in his blood." Bruce said.

Tony sighed.

"Let me guess... he's sick?" Tony asked, sadly.

"N-No, no... that's- that's not it. His DNA... it's mutated..." Bruce said.

Tony raised an eyebrow.

"With what exactly?" Steve asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You're not going to believe me... but it's spider DNA." Bruce said.

Everyone looked at each other.

"But that's not the only thing that I found..." Bruce said nervously.

PETER'S POV:

After Peter got out of the shower, he dried himself off, now fully cleaned. He felt wonderful. He ended up taking longer than he should have in the shower, but he really needed it. He changed into the new pair of clothes Sam gave him, and looked at himself in the mirror. He looked much better than before. His hair was cleaned, and so was the rest of him. Peter began to clean up the clothes that he was wearing before his shower, and he had a slight smile on his face. But he lost it in a second.

"_I'll probably have to leave soon... then I'm back on the streets."
_Peter sadly thought, as he put the clothes in the hamper.

He sighed. There wasn't anything that he could do about it. Peter cleaned the shower off, making sure that everything was just the way

that he left it. He rubbed the towel on his damp hair, leaving it half-dried. He was lucky that before this all happened to him, his hair was pretty short. Now it was a normal length. Right now, it was impossible to even tell that Peter was homeless. It gave Peter a little bit of confidence. A little bit of hope even. He saw that there was a package with a new toothbrush and toothpaste on the sink, so Peter took the opportunity to brush his teeth. Once he finished, he cleaned the sink with a piece of toilet paper, and threw it in the toilet. He flushed the toilet and sighed.

"_It must really be nice to live here... they have everything that _they_ need." _Peter sadly thought, as he washed his hands in the sink.

He dried his hands on the same towel that he used the night before, and put it in the laundry bin with the other dirty clothes. He walked over to the bathroom door, and opened it. He stepped out into the hallway, then walked down it towards where he thought the main room was. He remembered the walk that he took last night, so it was easy find the main room. Peter still couldn't believe it. He was in the Avenger's tower. Tony Stark's building! Peter didn't know if he should feel scared, nervous, or happy. His stomach growled, taking Peter away from his thoughts. He then remembered that Sam said to go up to the Avenger's main floor for breakfast. And Peter sure as heck wasn't going to turn down a free meal. He walked up to the elevator, and the doors automatically opened. Once he walked in, the elevator doors closed behind him and he felt it move up.

"_This is freaky... I didn't press any buttons..." _Peter thought, looking around the elevator.

When it stopped, the doors opened, revealing the Avenger's main floor. Peter has been here before, except as Spider-Man... not Peter Parker. Peter sighed, walking out of the elevator. He looked around, and saw the kitchen. He walked right in, but he no one was there. There was a plate covered with aluminum foil, and there was a sticky note attached. He walked over and saw that it had his name on it. Peter inwardly sighed with relief, and quickly unwrapped the plate. There was a full plate with scrambled eggs, bacon and toast. It was still warm, so who ever made this for him must have left. He was thankful for that, because he would have been a little embarrassed to eat around anyone. He grabbed the fork that was on top of the plate, and got a few pieces of egg onto it. He ate it, and it was like fireworks going off in his mouth. He couldn't remember the last time he had eggs like these, but he was very grateful to who ever made them for him. Within a few minutes, Peter finished the plate of food, and for the first time, he felt his gnawing hunger subside. Peter smiled to himself with that knowledge. He was sitting at the kitchen counter top on a bar stool, looking around the beautiful room. He remembered being here, in the exact same spot as Spider-Man, months before his life turned upside down. He had helped the Avengers on a mission, and they all came back here to celebrate their win. Peter smiled to himself. The Avengers were all great people. And now this just proved it with them helping Peter. He was just afraid what they thought of Spider-Man now that they knew that Spider-Man was really a homeless kid. Peter sighed. He would just have to wait and see what happens next.

**Hey guys! Welcome everyone who is new to reading this! This was a blast to write, and I'm so excited to start a new journey with this

story! Thank you all for your encouraging reviews, and all of your likes, favorites, and follows!

**

MarvelSpiderMan

P.S.

Thank you all so much for your reviews! I made a mistake though about Peter's aunt. She IS in fact alive, but she was deemed an unfit guardian for Peter. I'm SO, SO sorry if I caused any confusion for any of you guys!

16. Chapter 16

AVENGER'S POV:

"Okay and no one else is freaked out about the fact that this kid has spider DNA in his blood?" Clint asked, looking around the lab at everyone.

Tony raised an eyebrow.

"How is that even possible? Wait. Do you think he's one of those mutants?" Tony asked, looking at Bruce.

Bruce shook his head.

"No. I don't think so. I'm not one hundred percent sure, but this isn't the first time that we've met him." Bruce said, a little uneasy.

Steve looked at Bruce, with a confused face.

"What do you mean, Bruce?" Steve asked.

Bruce simply folded his arms over his chest.

Clint looked from Bruce, and looked at the floor. His eyes grew a little wide, and he quickly looked up at Bruce.

"Wait a minute. You don't mean to say that!" Clint said, shocked.

Bruce simply nodded.

"What? What is it?" Sam asked, confused at the conversation.

Tony looked at Bruce with the same expression that Clint had.

"No way!" Tony said, shocked.

Bruce nodded.

"Wow!" Tony said, leaning against the lab table.

Sam sighed, frustrated.

"Can someone please clarify this for me? What is wrong with Peter?"

Sam asked.

Bruce sighed slightly. He walked over to one of the closets, and pulled something out from it. He came back over to the group, and put it on the closest lab table. Sam looked at it, confused. It was a red piece of clothing.

"Peter is Spider-Man." Bruce said, with a hint of sadness in his voice.

Sam looked up at him, then looked at everyone else. He was speechless. The kid that he has been helping for a few months, was Spider-Man.

"Wellâ€| that explains a lot." Tony said.

Bruce nodded.

"Spider-Man hasn't really been sighted a lot lately. But when he is, people say that he's not his usual talkative selfâ€| this explains why." Tony said, folding his arms.

Sam unfolded the red material, revealing a black spider symbol. The suit was in bad shape. It had a few rips in it, and it was a dull red color. Everyone watched in silence as Sam looked at the suit.

"We have to help him." Sam said, still looking at the suit.

"But how? He can't talk." Clint said.

Sam shook his head, and put the damaged suit back on the table. He turned around and looked at Clint, then at everyone.

"I don't think that it's a matter of him completely loosing his voice. I think that it has a lot to do with him not having any confidence in himself, and not trusting the people that are around him." Sam said, crossing his arms.

"What do you mean by that?" Tony asked.

Sam sighed slightly.

"Well, think of it in a sixteen year old's perspective. He got taken away from the only family that he has, he was taken to two foster homes, and then he ran away, and now lives on the streets. He doesn't trust people anymore." Sam said.

"So it can't be depression or something causing him not to talkâ€| it has to be something more than that." Tony said, understanding what Sam was saying.

Bruce nodded.

"It could possibly be a disorder of some kind." Bruce suggested.

Tony nodded.

"Yes, it very well could beâ€| Jarvis, search the internet for this." Tony said.

_ "Yes, sir." _Jarvis responded.

"I wonder how long he hasn't been talking for." Bruce said, curious.

Sam shrugged.

"Who knows. Maybe it started when he left the last foster home he was in?" Sam said.

_ "Sir, I believe based off of Mr. Parker's symptoms that he has selective mutism." _Jarvis said.

Clint raised an eyebrow slightly.

"What's that?" Clint asked.

_ "Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder in which a person who is normally capable of speech does not speak in specific situations or to specific people. Selective mutism usually co-exists with shyness or social anxiety." _Jarvis said.

Tony nodded.

"Well, Sam. You weren't too far off. That is the reason why he's not talking." Tony said.

Sam nodded.

"How do we help him with this? Is it curable?" Steve asked.

_ "It is suggested that the person with selective mutism have a therapist, be in a relaxed environment, and have self-esteem activities in the therapeutic setting. There are multiple things to do to help, but it is highly recommended to not force speech." _Jarvis said.

Sam nodded.

"Being out on the streets sure as heck isn't helping him." Sam said, with a slight sigh.

"Wellâ€¦ what can we do?" Clint asked.

"He can stay here." Tony said.

Everyone looked at him.

"Would you be alright with it?" Sam asked, slightly shocked that Tony made the suggestion.

Tony nodded.

"He helped me once. I was going through a rough time a while back. Spidey gave me some advice, and I've been living off of it ever since. I'm just returning him the favor." Tony said.

Everyone was a little speechless at that. Who knew Tony Stark would say that about someone.

"Where is he going to stay?" Clint asked.

"He can stay with me on my floor. I never have anyone over, so he can stay in the guest bedroom that he's in now." Sam suggested.

Tony nodded.

"Yeah, that's a good idea." Tony said.

"Besides, it seems like he trusts you more than anyone." Steve said, looking at Sam.

Sam nodded.

"Yeahâ€¢ but what's he going to think of me once he knows that we all know he's Spider-Man?" Sam asked.

Steve sighed slightly.

"We need to keep it to ourselves. Pretend that we don't know anything." Steve said.

Sam nodded.

"Good idea." Sam said in agreement.

"Clint. You have a big mouth. You make sure that you don't say anything." Natasha said, looking sternly at the archer.

Clint sighed, and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Alright, but it's not going to be easy." Clint said.

Natasha rolled her eyes at him.

"What can we do in the mean time to help him?" Steve asked.

"I'm not sure, I'll have to do more research about his condition." Bruce said.

Tony snapped his fingers.

"He's good with science! We can bring him up here some time and have him work on some sciencey things!" Tony said with a grin.

Bruce nodded.

"That could work." Bruce said.

"If he wanted to he could do some training with us when he feels a little bit more comfortable around us." Natasha suggested.

Steve nodded.

"Yeah, and when he's doing better I can take him out with me on my morning runs." Steve suggested.

Tony nodded.

"Yes. See, these are all great ideas. We can definitely help this kid!" Tony said with a smile.

Sam smiled slightly, but frowned after he thought of something.

"What do we do about the state? They're probably not looking for him because of all of the other kids that they have, but we just can't keep him here without notifying someone." Sam said.

Bruce sighed, and looked at Tony.

"No worries. I'll take care of the legal business." Tony said.

Sam raised an eyebrow.

"What are you going to say to them?" Clint asked.

Tony sighed.

"Uh-uh well I'm not sure." Tony said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Are you going to be a foster parent? Or adopt him?" Clint asked, raising an eyebrow.

Tony shrugged.

"I-I don't know. But I'm willing to go out on a limb for this kid. After everything that he's been through, and all of the lives that he's saved, he deserves someone to help him out." Tony said.

Sam nodded.

"I agree." Sam said.

"Well. Let's not worry about the legal stuff now. We were on a roll a minute ago. Let's think activities, what type of stuff could we all do with him that could help him get to know us?" Tony asked.

"Uh-uh we could go for walks, maybe watch tv, video games, bored games!" Sam suggested.

Tony nodded.

"Someone take notes." Tony said.

Natasha sighed, and went over to the lab table. She opened a drawer and took out a small notepad and a pen. She looked up at them.

"What else?" She asked, as she wrote down the stuff that Sam said.

"We could have movie nights." Clint suggested.

Natasha nodded, and wrote it down.

"I mean, the kid's only sixteen. What do sixteen year olds like?" Tony said, rubbing his chin in thought.

"Socialization is probably the best thing for him. What could we all do together?" Bruce said.

"We wrote down a few things already. Maybe we could ask him in some way what he likes to do?" Steve suggested.

Sam nodded.

"Yeah. But it's just how do we find that out? Theres the talking part. We don't know that much about him. How can he tell us?" Sam said.

"Maybe we can have him write down some stuff for us, about what he likes. His favorite activities, movies, foods, books." Natasha suggested.

Sam nodded.

"That could work." Sam said.

"It's a little too early to be thinking about this, but what about his school work?" Steve said.

Tony sighed.

"Yeahâ€œ| that's definitely important. I'll have to think about that one, along with the state stuff." Tony said, rubbing his chin.

"We have a lot of great ideas for now to help him." Natasha said, looking over the list.

"Awe, Tasha does like kids after all." Clint said with a smirk.

She looked at him, and rolled her eyes.

"Not all kids. He did save my butt once while we were on a mission together." Natasha said, writing something down on the notepad.

"Wow. Really?" Clint asked, raising an eyebrow.

Natasha nodded.

"Yeah. We split up when we went into that secret Hydra base. Spider-Man was with me. There was a few gunman around the corner, and they started shooting at us. I had no idea what hit us. Spider-Man pulled me away from them just in time. Not to mention that he took them all down in ten seconds flat." Natasha said with a slight smirk.

"Why didn't you tell us that?" Clint asked.

She shrugged.

"I guess that it's an ego thing." Tony said with a grin.

"Oh, yeah? Look whose talking." Natasha said with a smirk.

Tony laughed slightly.

"What makes you say that?" Tony asked.

"Well, you do have something to do with Iron Man in every room." Clint said.

Tony laughed slightly.

"True, but I make this place pop." Tony said, with a grin.

Natasha rolled her eyes.

"Anywayâ€¦ the kid deserves our help. Anyway that we can." Natasha said, becoming serious again.

Sam nodded.

Tony looked at the clock on the wall, then looked at Sam.

"By the way, do you know what the kid's up to? It's ten o'clock." Tony said.

Sam quickly glanced at the clock.

"He was awake when I checked in on him. I should probably go back up to check in on him." Sam said, making his way towards the elevator.

"While you do that, tell him to make a list for us." Tony said to Sam, as he got in the elevator.

"Will do." Sam said, as the elevator doors shut.

PETER'S POV:

After Peter had finished his breakfast, he found the dishwasher, and put it inside. He wasn't exactly sure what to do with it at first, due to the fact that the plate looked expensive. Peter walked out of the kitchen, and started to walk around the floor that he was on. A little exploring around Avenger's Tower sounded fun.

_ "This place is huge." _Peter thought, as he made his way down a large hallway.

A few minutes passed, as Peter looked around the hallway at all of the art along the walls. It was like a museum! Peter started to think about a few things as he looked around.

_ "I really wish that I could talk somehow around peopleâ€¦ especially Sam. I like him. I don't want him to think that I have a problem or I don't like him. I really hate how this happened in the first place." _ Peter thought with a frown.

He sighed.

_ "Maybe I should practice talking when I'm alone? That could help me get over thisâ€¦ this muteness thing that I have. Maybe I should try humming when I'm alone, then work my way up to talking." _ Peter thought.

Peter tried it, and he got a little squeaky sound come from his

throat. Peter sighed. He tried again, and this time he managed to make a 'hm' sound. It wasn't much, but it was something. Peter reached the end of the hallway, and turned back around. Then something suddenly dawned on Peter.

"I'll have to leave now! I should probably look around for my stuff." Peter thought.

It was really depressing for Peter. He used to have such a good life compared to the one he was living now. He lived in a nice house with his aunt, he had friends, he went to school, he got good grades, and he was Spider-Man. He had his web shooters then, his suit was in great shape, and so much more. He now realized that he took those things for granted.

"I miss Aunt May so much! I wonder if she misses me." Peter sadly thought, looking at the floor as he slowly walked down the hallway.

He was about to go around the corner of the hallway, but his spider sense quickly went off. He jumped back a little in surprise, avoiding a head on collision with Sam.

"Peter! There you are. I was looking for you." Sam said with a smile.

Peter inwardly sighed. He smiled slightly.

"Well I see that you found what I left for you." Sam said with a warm smile.

Peter nodded.

"That's good. Listen, I wanted to ask you something." Sam said.

"Uh oh. Here it comes." Peter thought, biting his lower lip.

"Do you want to sit in the living room so we can talk?" Sam asked.

Peter nodded.

"So Sam can talk. I wish I didn't have this stupid anxiety problem!" Peter thought.

"Ok." Sam said with a smile.

They both kept walking ahead, going past a few more pictures on the wall. Once they reached the main room, Sam walked into the living room, followed by Peter. Sam motioned for Peter to sit down on the couch. Peter was slightly hesitant to, but he did. Sam sighed slightly.

"I know that things have been rough for you! with everything that's happened and all! but I want you to know that I'm here for you. We all are. I should have told you the truth about me, Steve, Natasha, and Clint. We put you in danger yesterday. I'm sorry for that." Sam said.

Peter nodded, and smiled a little to let him know that it was alright. Sam smiled slightly.

"And alsoâ€œ I wanted to know if you would like to stay here with us." Sam said with a smile.

Peter raised an eyebrow slightly.

_ "The Avengers want me, a homeless kid, who just so happens to be Spider-Man, to stay in their tower with them?" _Peter thought.

"We want you to stay here, Peter." Sam said with a smile.

Peter looked down at his lap in thought.

_ "Why? Why would they want me to stay here with them?" _Peter thought.

"What do you say?" Sam asked.

Peter looked up at him, a little uncertain.

_ "It's either thisâ€œ or I'm back on the streets." _Peter thought.

Peter nodded, and smiled slightly.

"That's great. You're alright with this?" Sam asked, with a smile.

Peter nodded and smiled. He trusted Sam. He knew that he was a good person, and obviously the Avengers were all good people.

"Well alright then." Sam said with a smile.

Just then, the elevator doors opened up and Steve walked out. He looked up and saw Sam and Peter sitting there.

"Hey, Peter." Steve greeted with a warm smile.

Peter smiled back, a little awkward. Steve walked into the living room, and stood next to Sam's chair.

"Peter has agreed to stay with us." Sam said with a smile.

Steve smiled and looked at Peter.

"I'm glad to hear that." Steve said.

Peter smiled awkwardly.

"I was thinking, if you wanted to, you could make a list of some stuff that you liked to do?" Sam asked.

Peter nodded and smiled slightly.

"Also write down what types of foods you like too." Steve said with a kind smile.

Peter nodded, and smiled a little.

"By the way, Tony wanted to know if you wanted to watch Star Wars?" Steve said, with a confused face, looking at Peter.

Peter smiled and nodded.

"I don't really know what that is, but I'm glad that you do." Steve said with a slight smile.

"It's a long story to explain. Once you watch a few of the movies from the series, you'll get it." Sam said to Steve.

"That's what Tony said to me." Steve said with a slight chuckle.

"Have you seen all of the movies, Peter?" Sam asked with a slight smile.

Peter nodded with a smile.

"Wow. That's awesome. Did you like them all?" Sam asked with a smile.

Peter nodded with a smile.

"I did too. You're going to like it, Steve." Sam said, looking at Steve with a smile.

Steve smiled.

"I hope soâ€¦ is it anything like Star Trek? I've see a few episodes of that." Steve asked, uncertain.

"Uhhâ€¦ a little. Star Wars is more about fighting than Star Trek." Sam said.

Steve nodded.

"Well, it sounds interesting." Steve said.

Peter smiled slightly. Maybe this was going to be a good thing for him. But one thing ran through Peter's head.

_ "What if something happens to the Avengers because of me? I have a bad history of people I love and care about getting hurt. If something happens to the Avengersâ€¦ it would be all my fault."
_Peter thought, with a frown.

**Hey everyone! (yes, that's a Captain America: Civil War thing, lol) I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! Sorry that it's a little short, but I wanted to get something out for this. I am so shocked at all of the followers I have gotten in the past couple of days! So, hello to all of you new readers out there! : D Thank you so much for all of the encouraging reviews! **

MarvelSpiderMan

P.S. If you guys like Spidey fanfics, take a look at my story, "The Day In The Life of Peter Parker." :)

End
file.